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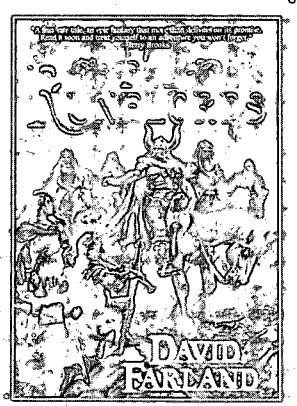

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Bruce Sterling's last novel was the wonderful Holy Fire *and he reports that his next,* Distraction *is due out later this year. The following story was written in English, but it was initially translated into Japanese and published in* Hayakawa S-F *magazine. We're happy now to bring to readers of English this decidedly Asian—and definitely international—tale.*

Maneki Neko

By Bruce Sterling

"I CAN'T GO ON," HIS BROTHER said.

Tsuyoshi Shimizu looked thoughtfully into the screen of his pasokon. His older brother's face was shiny with sweat from a late-night drinking bout. "It's only a career," said Tsuyoshi, sitting up on his futon and adjusting his pajamas. "You worry too much."

"All that overtime!" his brother whined. He was making the call from a bar somewhere in Shibuya. In the background, a middle-aged office lady was singing karaoke, badly. "And the examination hells. The manager training programs. The proficiency tests. I never have time to live!"

Tsuyoshi grunted sympathetically. He didn't like these late-night videophone calls, but he felt obliged to listen. His big brother had always been a decent sort, before he had gone through the elite courses at Waseda University, joined a big corporation, and gotten professionally ambitious.

"My back hurts," his brother groused. "I have an ulcer. My hair is going gray. And I know they'll fire me. No matter how loyal you are to the

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big companies, they have no loyalty to their employees anymore. It's no wonder that I drink."

"You should get married," Tsuyoshi offered.

"I can't find the right girl. Women never understand me." He shuddered. "Tsuyoshi, I'm truly desperate. The market pressures are crushing me. I can't breathe. My life has got to change. I'm thinking of taking the vows. I'm serious! I want to renounce this whole modern world."

Tsuyoshi was alarmed. "You're very drunk, right?"

His brother leaned closer to the screen. "Life in a monastery sounds truly good to me. It's so quiet there. You recite the sutras. You consider your existence. There are rules to follow, and rewards that make sense. It's just the way that Japanese business used to be, back in the good old days."

Tsuyoshi grunted skeptically.

"Last week I went out to a special place in the mountains...Mount Aso," his brother confided. "The monks there, they know about people in trouble, people who are burned out by modern life. The monks protect you from the world. No computers, no phones, no faxes, no e-mail, no overtime, no commuting, nothing at all. It's beautiful, and it's peaceful, and nothing ever happens there. Really, it's like paradise."

"Listen, older brother," Tsuyoshi said, "you're not a religious man by nature. You're a section chief for a big import-export company."

"Well...maybe religion won't work for me. I did think of running away to America. Nothing much ever happens there, either."

Tsuyoshi smiled. "That sounds much better! America is a good vacation spot. A long vacation is just what you need! Besides, the Americans are real friendly since they gave up their handguns."

"But I can't go through with it," his brother wailed. "I just don't dare. I can't just wander away from everything that I know, and trust to the kindness of strangers."

"That always works for me," Tsuyoshi said. "Maybe you should try it."

Tsuyoshi's wife stirred uneasily on the futon. Tsuyoshi lowered his voice. "Sorry, but I have to hang up now. Call me before you do anything rash."

"Don't tell Dad," Tsuyoshi's brother said. "He worries so."

"I won't tell Dad." Tsuyoshi cut the connection and the screen went dark.

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Tsuyoshi's wife rolled over, heavily. She was seven months pregnant. She stared at the ceiling, puffing for breath. "Was that another call from your brother?" she said.

"Yeah. The company just gave him another promotion. More responsibilities. He's celebrating."

"That sounds nice," his wife said tactfully.

NEXT MORNING, Tsuyoshi slept late. He was self-employed, so he kept his own hours. Tsuyoshi was a video format upgrader by trade. He transferred old videos from obsolete formats into the new high-grade storage media. Doing this properly took a craftsman's eye. Word of Tsuyoshi's skills had gotten out on the network, so he had as much work as he could handle.

At ten A.M., the mailman arrived. Tsuyoshi abandoned his breakfast of raw egg and miso soup, and signed for a shipment of flaking, twentieth-century analog television tapes. The mail also brought a fresh overnight shipment of strawberries, and a homemade jar of pickles.

"Pickles!" his wife enthused. "People are so nice to you when you're pregnant."

"Any idea who sent us that?"

"Just someone on the network."

"Great."

Tsuyoshi booted his mediator, cleaned his superconducting heads and examined the old tapes. Home videos from the 1980s. Someone's grandmother as a child, presumably. There had been a lot of flaking and loss of polarity in the old recording medium.

Tsuyoshi got to work with his desktop fractal detail generator, the image stabilizer, and the interlace algorithms. When he was done, Tsuyoshi's new digital copies would look much sharper, cleaner, and better composed than the original primitive videotape.

Tsuyoshi enjoyed his work. Quite often he came across bits and pieces of videotape that were of archival interest. He would pass the images on to the net. The really big network databases, with their armies of search engines, indexers, and catalogues, had some very arcane interests. The net machines would never pay for data, because the global

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information networks were noncommercial. But the net machines were very polite, and had excellent net etiquette. They returned a favor for a favor, and since they were machines with excellent, enormous memories, they never forgot a good deed.

Tsuyoshi and his wife had a lunch of ramen with naruto, and she left to go shopping. A shipment arrived by overseas package service. Cute baby clothes from Darwin, Australia. They were in his wife's favorite color, sunshine yellow.

Tsuyoshi finished transferring the first tape to a new crystal disk. Time for a break. He left his apartment, took the elevator and went out to the corner coffeeshop. He ordered a double iced mocha cappuccino and paid with a chargecard.

His pokkecon rang. Tsuyoshi took it from his belt and answered it. "Get one to go," the machine told him.

"Okay," said Tsuyoshi, and hung up. He bought a second coffee, put a lid on it and left the shop.

A man in a business suit was sitting on a park bench near the entrance of Tsuyoshi's building. The man's suit was good, but it looked as if he'd slept in it. He was holding his head in his hands and rocking gently back and forth. He was unshaven and his eyes were red-rimmed.

The pokkecon rang again. "The coffee's for him?" Tsuyoshi said.

"Yes," said the pokkecon. "He needs it."

Tsuyoshi walked up to the lost businessman. The man looked up, flinching warily, as if he were about to be kicked. "What is it?" he said.

"Here," Tsuyoshi said, handing him the cup. "Double iced mocha cappuccino."

The man opened the cup, and smelled it. He looked up in disbelief. "This is my favorite kind of coffee.... Who are you?"

Tsuyoshi lifted his arm and offered a hand signal, his fingers clenched like a cat's paw. The man showed no recognition of the gesture. Tsuyoshi shrugged, and smiled. "It doesn't matter. Sometimes a man really needs a coffee. Now you have a coffee. That's all."

"Well...." The man cautiously sipped his cup, and suddenly smiled. "It's really great. Thanks!"

"You're welcome." Tsuyoshi went home.

His wife arrived from shopping. She had bought new shoes. The

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pregnancy was making her feet swell. She sat carefully on the couch and sighed.

"Orthopedic shoes are expensive," she said, looking at the yellow pumps. "I hope you don't think they look ugly."

"On you, they look really cute," Tsuyoshi said wisely. He had first met his wife at a video store. She had just used her credit card to buy a disk of primitive black-and-white American anime of the 1950s. The pokkecon had urged him to go up and speak to her on the subject of Felix the Cat. Felix was an early television cartoon star and one of Tsuyoshi's personal favorites.

Tsuyoshi would have been too shy to approach an attractive woman on his own, but no one was a stranger to the net. This fact gave him the confidence to speak to her. Tsuyoshi had soon discovered that the girl was delighted to discuss her deep fondness for cute, antique, animated cats. They'd had lunch together. They'd had a date the next week. They had spent Christmas Eve together in a love hotel. They had a lot in common.

She had come into his life through a little act of grace, a little gift from Felix the Cat's magic bag of tricks. Tsuyoshi had never gotten over feeling grateful for this. Now that he was married and becoming a father, Tsuyoshi Shimizu could feel himself becoming solidly fixed in life. He had a man's role to play now. He knew who he was, and he knew where he stood. Life was good to him.

"You need a haircut, dear," his wife told him.

"Sure."

His wife pulled a gift box out of her shopping bag. "Can you go to the Hotel Daruma, and get your hair cut, and deliver this box for me?"

"What is it?" Tsuyoshi said.

Tsuyoshi's wife opened the little wooden gift box. A maneki neko was nestled inside white foam padding. The smiling ceramic cat held one paw upraised, beckoning for good fortune.

"Don't you have enough of those yet?" he said. "You even have maneki neko underwear."

"It's not for my collection. It's a gift for someone at the Hotel Daruma."

"Oh."

"Some foreign woman gave me this box at the shoestore. She looked

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American. She couldn't speak Japanese. She had really nice shoes, though...."

"If the network gave you that little cat, then you're the one who should take care of that obligation, dear."

"But dear," she sighed, "my feet hurt so much, and you could do with a haircut anyway, and I have to cook supper, and besides, it's not really a nice maneki neko, it's just cheap tourist souvenir junk. Can't you do it?"

"Oh, all right," Tsuyoshi told her. "Just forward your pokkecon prompts onto my machine, and I'll see what I can do for us."

She smiled. "I knew you would do it. You're really so good to me."

Tsuyoshi left with the little box. He wasn't unhappy to do the errand, as it wasn't always easy to manage his pregnant wife's volatile moods in their small six-tatami apartment. The local neighborhood was good, but he was hoping to find bigger accommodations before the child was born. Maybe a place with a little studio, where he could expand the scope of his work. It was very hard to find decent housing in Tokyo, but word was out on the net. Friends he didn't even know were working every day to help him. If he kept up with the net's obligations, he had every confidence that some day something nice would turn up.

Tsuyoshi went into the local pachinko parlor, where he won half a liter of beer and a train chargecard. He drank the beer, took the new train card and wedged himself into the train. He got out at the Ebisu station, and turned on his pokkecon Tokyo street map to guide his steps. He walked past places called Chocolate Soup, and Freshness Physique, and The Aladdin Mai-Tai Panico Trattoria.

He entered the Hotel Daruma and went to the hotel barber shop, which was called the Daruma Planet Look. "May I help you?" said the receptionist.

"I'm thinking, a shave and a trim," Tsuyoshi said.

"Do you have an appointment with us?"

"Sorry, no." Tsuyoshi offered a hand gesture.

The woman gestured back, a jerky series of cryptic finger movements. Tsuyoshi didn't recognize any of the gestures. She wasn't from his part of the network.

"Oh well, never mind," the receptionist said kindly. "I'll get Nahoko to look after you."

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Nahoko was carefully shaving the fine hair from Tsuyoshi's forehead when the pokkecon rang. Tsuyoshi answered it.

"Go to the ladies' room on the fourth floor," the pokkecon told him.

"Sorry, I can't do that. This is Tsuyoshi Shimizu, not Ai Shimizu. Besides, I'm having my hair cut right now."

"Oh, I see," said the machine. "Recalibrating." It hung up.

Nahoko finished his hair. She had done a good job. He looked much better. A man who worked at home had to take special trouble to keep up appearances. The pokkecon rang again.

"Yes?" said Tsuyoshi.

"Buy bay rum aftershave. Take it outside."

"Right." He hung up. "Nahoko, do you have bay rum?"

"Odd you should ask that," said Nahoko. "Hardly anyone asks for bay rum anymore, but our shop happens to keep it in stock."

Tsuyoshi bought the aftershave, then stepped outside the barbershop. Nothing happened, so he bought a manga comic and waited. Finally a hairy, blond stranger in shorts, a tropical shirt, and sandals approached him. The foreigner was carrying a camera bag and an old-fashioned pokkecon. He looked about sixty years old, and he was very tall.

The man spoke to his pokkecon in English. "Excuse me," said the pokkecon, translating the man's speech into Japanese. "Do you have a bottle of bay rum aftershave?"

"Yes I do." Tsuyoshi handed the bottle over. "Here."

"Thank goodness!" said the man, his words relayed through his machine. "I've asked everyone else in the lobby. Sorry I was late."

"No problem," said Tsuyoshi. "That's a nice pokkecon you have there."

"Well," the man said, "I know it's old and out of style. But I plan to buy a new pokkecon here in Tokyo. I'm told that they sell pokkecons by the basketful in Akihabara electronics market."

"That's right. What kind of translator program are you running? Your translator talks like someone from Osaka."

"Does it sound funny?" the tourist asked anxiously.

"Well, I don't want to complain, but...." Tsuyoshi smiled. "Here, let's trade meishi. I can give you a copy of a brand-new freeware translator."

"That would be wonderful." They pressed buttons and squirted copies of their business cards across the network link.

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Tsuyoshi examined his copy of the man's electronic card and saw that his name was Zimmerman. Mr. Zimmerman was from New Zealand. Tsuyoshi activated a transfer program. His modern pokkecon began transferring a new translator onto Zimmerman's machine.

A large American man in a padded suit entered the lobby of the Daruma. The man wore sunglasses, and was sweating visibly in the summer heat. The American looked huge, as if he lifted a lot of weights. Then a Japanese woman followed him. The woman was sharply dressed, with a dark blue dress suit, hat, sunglasses, and an attaché case. She had a haunted look.

Her escort turned and carefully watched the bellhops, who were bringing in a series of bags. The woman walked crisply to the reception desk and began making anxious demands of the clerk.

"I'm a great believer in machine translation," Tsuyoshi said to the tall man from New Zealand. "I really believe that computers help human beings to relate in a much more human way."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Mr. Zimmerman, through his machine. "I can remember the first time I came to your country, many years ago. I had no portable translator. In fact, I had nothing but a printed phrasebook. I happened to go into a bar, and..."

Zimmerman stopped and gazed alertly at his pokkecon. "Oh dear, I'm getting a screen prompt. I have to go up to my room right away."

"Then I'll come along with you till this software transfer is done," Tsuyoshi said.

"That's very kind of you." They got into the elevator together. Zimmerman punched for the fourth floor. "Anyway, as I was saying, I went into this bar in Roppongi late at night, because I was jetlagged and hoping for something to eat..."

"Yes?"

"And this woman...well, let's just say this woman was hanging out in a foreigner's bar in Roppongi late at night, and she wasn't wearing a whole lot of clothes, and she didn't look like she was any better than she ought to be...."

"Yes, I think I understand you."

"Anyway, this menu they gave me was full of kanji, or katakana, or romanji, or whatever they call those, so I had my phrasebook out, and I was trying very hard to puzzle out these pesky ideograms..." The elevator

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opened and they stepped into the carpeted hall of the hotel's fourth floor. "So I opened the menu and I pointed to an entree, and I told this girl...." Zimmerman stopped suddenly, and stared at his screen. "Oh dear, something's happening. Just a moment."

Zimmerman carefully studied the instructions on his pokkecon. Then he pulled the bottle of bay rum from the baggy pocket of his shorts, and unscrewed the cap. He stood on tiptoe, stretching to his full height, and carefully poured the contents of the bottle through the iron louvers of a ventilation grate, set high in the top of the wall.

ZIMMERMAN screwed the cap back on neatly, and slipped the empty bottle back in his pocket. Then he examined his pokkecon again. He frowned, and shook it. The screen had frozen. Apparently Tsuyoshi's new translation program had overloaded Zimmerman's old-fashioned operating system. His pokkecon had crashed.

Zimmerman spoke a few defeated sentences in English. Then he smiled, and spread his hands apologetically. He bowed, and went into his room, and shut the door.

The Japanese woman and her burly American escort entered the hall. The man gave Tsuyoshi a hard stare. The woman opened the door with a passcard. Her hands were shaking.

Tsuyoshi's pokkecon rang. "Leave the hall," it told him. "Go downstairs. Get into the elevator with the bellboy."

Tsuyoshi followed instructions.

The bellboy was just entering the elevator with a cart full of the woman's baggage. Tsuyoshi got into the elevator, stepping carefully behind the wheeled metal cart. "What floor, sir?" said the bellboy.

"Eight," Tsuyoshi said, ad-libbing. The bellboy turned and pushed the buttons. He faced forward attentively, his gloved hands folded.

The pokkecon flashed a silent line of text to the screen. "Put the gift box inside her flight bag," it read.

Tsuyoshi located the zippered blue bag at the back of the cart. It was a matter of instants to zip it open, put in the box with the maneki neko, and zip the bag shut again. The bellboy noticed nothing. He left, tugging his cart.

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Tsuyoshi got out on the eighth floor, feeling slightly foolish. He wandered down the hall, found a quiet nook by an ice machine and called his wife. "What's going on?" he said.

"Oh, nothing." She smiled. "Your haircut looks nice! Show me the back of your head."

Tsuyoshi held the pokkecon screen behind the nape of his neck.

"They do good work," his wife said with satisfaction. "I hope it didn't cost too much. Are you coming home now?"

"Things are getting a little odd here at the hotel," Tsuyoshi told her. "I may be some time."

His wife frowned. "Well, don't miss supper. We're having bonito."

Tsuyoshi took the elevator back down. It stopped at the fourth floor. The woman's American companion stepped onto the elevator. His nose was running and his eyes were streaming with tears.

"Are you all right?" Tsuyoshi said.

"I don't understand Japanese," the man growled. The elevator doors shut.

The man's cellular phone crackled into life. It emitted a scream of anguish and a burst of agitated female English. The man swore and slammed his hairy fist against the elevator's emergency button. The elevator stopped with a lurch. An alarm bell began ringing.

The man pried the doors open with his large hairy fingers and clambered out into the fourth floor. He then ran headlong down the hall.

The elevator began buzzing in protest, its doors shuddering as if broken. Tsuyoshi climbed hastily from the damaged elevator, and stood there in the hallway. He hesitated a moment. Then he produced his pokkecon and loaded his Japanese-to-English translator. He walked cautiously after the American man.

The door to their suite was open. Tsuyoshi spoke aloud into his pokkecon. "Hello?" he said experimentally. "May I be of help?"

The woman was sitting on the bed. She had just discovered the maneki neko box in her flight bag. She was staring at the little cat in horror.

"Who are you?" she said, in bad Japanese.

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Tsuyoshi realized suddenly that she was a Japanese American. Tsuyoshi had met a few Japanese Americans before. They always troubled him. They looked fairly normal from the outside, but their behavior was always bizarre. "I'm just a passing friend," he said. "Something I can do?"

"Grab him, Mitch!" said the woman in English. The American man rushed into the hall and grabbed Tsuyoshi by the arm. His hands were like steel bands.

Tsuyoshi pressed the distress button on his pokkecon.

"Take that computer away from him," the woman ordered in English. Mitch quickly took Tsuyoshi's pokkecon away, and threw it on the bed. He deftly patted Tsuyoshi's clothing, searching for weapons. Then he shoved Tsuyoshi into a chair.

The woman switched back to Japanese. "Sit right there, you. Don't you dare move." She began examining the contents of Tsuyoshi's wallet.

"I beg your pardon?" Tsuyoshi said. His pokkecon was lying on the bed. Lines of red text scrolled up its little screen as it silently issued a series of emergency net alerts.

The woman spoke to her companion in English. Tsuyoshi's pokkecon was still translating faithfully. "Mitch, go call the local police."

Mitch sneezed uncontrollably. Tsuyoshi noticed that the room smelled strongly of bay rum. "I can't talk to the local cops. I can't speak Japanese." Mitch sneezed again.

"Okay, then I'll call the cops. You handcuff this guy. Then go down to the infirmary and get yourself some antihistamines, for Christ's sake."

Mitch pulled a length of plastic whipcord cuff from his coat pocket, and attached Tsuyoshi's right wrist to the head of the bed. He mopped his streaming eyes with a tissue. "I'd better stay with you. If there's a cat in your luggage, then the criminal network already knows we're in Japan. You're in danger."

"Mitch, you may be my bodyguard, but you're breaking out in hives."

"This just isn't supposed to happen," Mitch complained, scratching his neck. "My allergies never interfered with my job before."

"Just leave me here and lock the door," the woman told him. "I'll put a chair against the knob. I'll be all right. You need to look after yourself."

Mitch left the room.

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The woman barricaded the door with a chair. Then she called the front desk on the hotel's bedside pasokon. "This is Louise Hashimoto in room 434. I have a gangster in my room. He's an information criminal. Would you call the Tokyo police, please? Tell them to send the organized crime unit. Yes, that's right. Do it. And you should put your hotel security people on full alert. There may be big trouble here. You'd better hurry." She hung up.

Tsuyoshi stared at her in astonishment. "Why are you doing this? What's all this about?"

"So you call yourself Tsuyoshi Shimizu," said the woman, examining his credit cards. She sat on the foot of the bed and stared at him. "You're yakuza of some kind, right?"

"I think you've made a big mistake," Tsuyoshi said.

Louise scowled. "Look, Mr. Shimizu, you're not dealing with some Yankee tourist here. My name is Louise Hashimoto and I'm an assistant federal prosecutor from Providence, Rhode Island, USA." She showed him a magnetic ID card with a gold official seal.

"It's nice to meet someone from the American government," said Tsuyoshi, bowing a bit in his chair. "I'd shake your hand, but it's tied to the bed."

"You can stop with the innocent act right now. I spotted you out in the hall earlier, and in the lobby, too, casing the hotel. How did you know my bodyguard is violently allergic to bay rum? You must have read his medical records."

"Who, me? Never!"

"Ever since I discovered you network people, it's been one big pattern," said Louise. "It's the biggest criminal conspiracy I ever saw. I busted this software pirate in Providence. He had a massive network server and a whole bunch of AI freeware search engines. We took him in custody, we bagged all his search engines, and catalogs, and indexers.... Later that very same day, these *cats* start showing up."

"Cats?"

Louise lifted the maneki neko, handling it as if it were a live eel. "These little Japanese voodoo cats. Maneki neko, right? They started showing up everywhere I went. There's a china cat in my handbag. There's three china cats at the office. Suddenly they're on display in the windows

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of every antique store in Providence. My car radio starts making meowing noises at me."

"You *broke* part of the network?" Tsuyoshi said, scandalized. "You took someone's machines away? That's terrible! How could you do such an inhuman thing?"

"You've got a real nerve complaining about that. What about *my* machinery?" Louise held up her fat, eerie-looking American pokkecon. "As soon as I stepped off the airplane at Narita, my PDA was attacked. Thousands and thousands of e-mail messages. All of them pictures of cats. A denial-of-service attack! I can't even communicate with the home office! My PDA's useless!"

"What's a PDA?"

"It's a PDA, my Personal Digital Assistant! Manufactured in Silicon Valley!"

"Well, with a goofy name like that, no wonder our pokkecons won't talk to it."

Louise frowned grimly. "That's right, wise guy. Make jokes about it. You're involved in a malicious software attack on a legal officer of the United States Government. You'll see." She paused, looking him over. "You know, Shimizu, you don't look much like the Italian mafia gangsters I have to deal with, back in Providence."

"I'm not a gangster at all. I never do anyone any harm."

"Oh no?" Louise glowered at him. "Listen, pal, I know a lot more about your set-up, and your kind of people, than you think I do. I've been studying your outfit for a long time now. We computer cops have names for your kind of people. Digital panarchies. Segmented, polycephalous, integrated influence networks. What about all these *free goods and services* you're getting all this time?"

She pointed a finger at him. "Ha! Do you ever pay *taxes* on those? Do you ever *declare* that income and those benefits? All the free shipments from other countries! The little homemade cookies, and the free pens and pencils and bumper stickers, and the used bicycles, and the helpful news about fire sales.... You're a tax evader! You're living through kickbacks! And bribes! And influence peddling! And all kinds of corrupt off-the-books transactions!"

Tsuyoshi blinked. "Look, I don't know anything about all that. I'm just living my life."

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"Well, your network gift economy is undermining the lawful, government approved, regulated economy!"

"Well," Tsuyoshi said gently, "maybe my economy is better than your economy."

"Says who?" she scoffed. "Why would anyone think that?"

"It's better because we're *happier* than you are. What's wrong with acts of kindness? Everyone likes gifts. Midsummer gifts. New Years Day gifts. Year-end presents. Wedding presents. Everybody likes those."

"Not the way you Japanese like them. You're totally crazy for gifts."

"What kind of society has no gifts? It's barbaric to have no regard for common human feelings."

Louise bristled. "You're saying I'm barbaric?"

"I don't mean to complain," Tsuyoshi said politely, "but you do have me tied up to your bed."

Louise crossed her arms. "You might as well stop complaining. You'll be in much worse trouble when the local police arrive."

"Then we'll probably be waiting here for quite a while," Tsuyoshi said. "The police move rather slowly, here in Japan. I'm sorry, but we don't have as much crime as you Americans, so our police are not very alert."

The pasokon rang at the side of the bed. Louise answered it. It was Tsuyoshi's wife.

"Could I speak to Tsuyoshi Shimizu please?"

"I'm over here, dear," Tsuyoshi called quickly. "She's kidnapped me! She tied me to the bed!"

"Tied to her *bed*?" His wife's eyes grew wide. "That does it! I'm calling the police!"

Louise quickly hung up the pasokon. "I haven't kidnapped you! I'm only detaining you here until the local authorities can come and arrest you."

"Arrest me for what, exactly?"

Louise thought quickly. "Well, for poisoning my bodyguard by pouring bay rum into the ventilator."

"But I never did that. Anyway, that's not illegal, is it?"

The pasokon rang again. A shining white cat appeared on the screen. It had large, staring, unearthly eyes.

"Let him go," the cat commanded in English.

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Louise shrieked and yanked the pasokon's plug from the wall.

Suddenly the lights went out. "Infrastructure attack!" Louise squawled. She rolled quickly under the bed.

The room went gloomy and quiet. The air conditioner had shut off. "I think you can come out," Tsuyoshi said at last, his voice loud in the still room. "It's just a power failure."

"No it isn't," Louise said. She crawled slowly from beneath the bed, and sat on the mattress. Somehow, the darkness had made them more intimate. "I know very well what this is. I'm under attack. I haven't had a moment's peace since I broke that network. Stuff just happens to me now. Bad stuff. Swarms of it. It's never anything you can touch, though. Nothing you can prove in a court of law."

She sighed. "I sit in chairs, and somebody's left a piece of gum there. I get free pizzas, but they're not the kind of pizzas I like. Little kids spit on my sidewalk. Old women in walkers get in front of me whenever I need to hurry."

The shower came on, all by itself. Louise shuddered, but said nothing. Slowly, the darkened, stuffy room began to fill with hot steam.

"My toilets don't flush," Louise said. "My letters get lost in the mail. When I walk by cars, their theft alarms go off. And strangers stare at me. It's always little things. Lots of little tiny things, but they never, ever stop. I'm up against something that is very very big, and very very patient. And it knows all about me. And it's got a million arms and legs. And all those arms and legs are people."

There was the noise of scuffling in the hall. Distant voices, confused shouting.

Suddenly the chair broke under the doorknob. The door burst open violently. Mitch tumbled through, the sunglasses flying from his head. Two hotel security guards were trying to grab him. Shouting incoherently in English, Mitch fell headlong to the floor, kicking and thrashing. The guards lost their hats in the struggle. One tackled Mitch's legs with both his arms, and the other whacked and jabbed him with a baton.

Puffing and grunting with effort, they hauled Mitch out of the room. The darkened room was so full of steam that the harried guards hadn't even noticed Tsuyoshi and Louise.

Louise stared at the broken door. "Why did they do that to him?"

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Tsuyoshi scratched his head in embarrassment. "Probably a failure of communication."

"Poor Mitch! They took his gun away at the airport. He had all kinds of technical problems with his passport.... Poor guy, he's never had any luck since he met me."

There was a loud tapping at the window. Louise shrank back in fear. Finally she gathered her courage, and opened the curtains. Daylight flooded the room.

A window-washing rig had been lowered from the roof of the hotel, on cables and pulleys. There were two window-washers in crisp gray uniforms. They waved cheerfully, making little catpaw gestures.

There was a third man with them. It was Tsuyoshi's brother.

One of the washers opened the window with a utility key. Tsuyoshi's brother squirmed into the room. He stood up and carefully adjusted his coat and tie.

"This is my brother," Tsuyoshi explained.

"What are you doing here?" Louise said.

"They always bring in the relatives when there's a hostage situation," Tsuyoshi's brother said. "The police just flew me in by helicopter and landed me on the roof." He looked Louise up and down. "Miss Hashimoto, you just have time to escape."

"What?" she said.

"Look down at the streets," he told her. "See that? You hear them? Crowds are pouring in from all over the city. All kinds of people, everyone with wheels. Street noodle salesmen. Bicycle messengers. Skateboard kids. Takeout delivery guys."

Louise gazed out the window into the streets, and shrieked aloud. "Oh no! A giant swarming mob! They're surrounding me! I'm doomed!"

"You are not doomed," Tsuyoshi's brother told her intently. "Come out the window. Get onto the platform with us. You've got one chance, Louise. It's a place I know, a sacred place in the mountains. No computers there, no phones, nothing." He paused. "It's a sanctuary for people like us. And I know the way."

She gripped his suited arm. "Can I trust you?"

"Look in my eyes," he told her. "Don't you see? Yes, of course you can trust me. We have everything in common."

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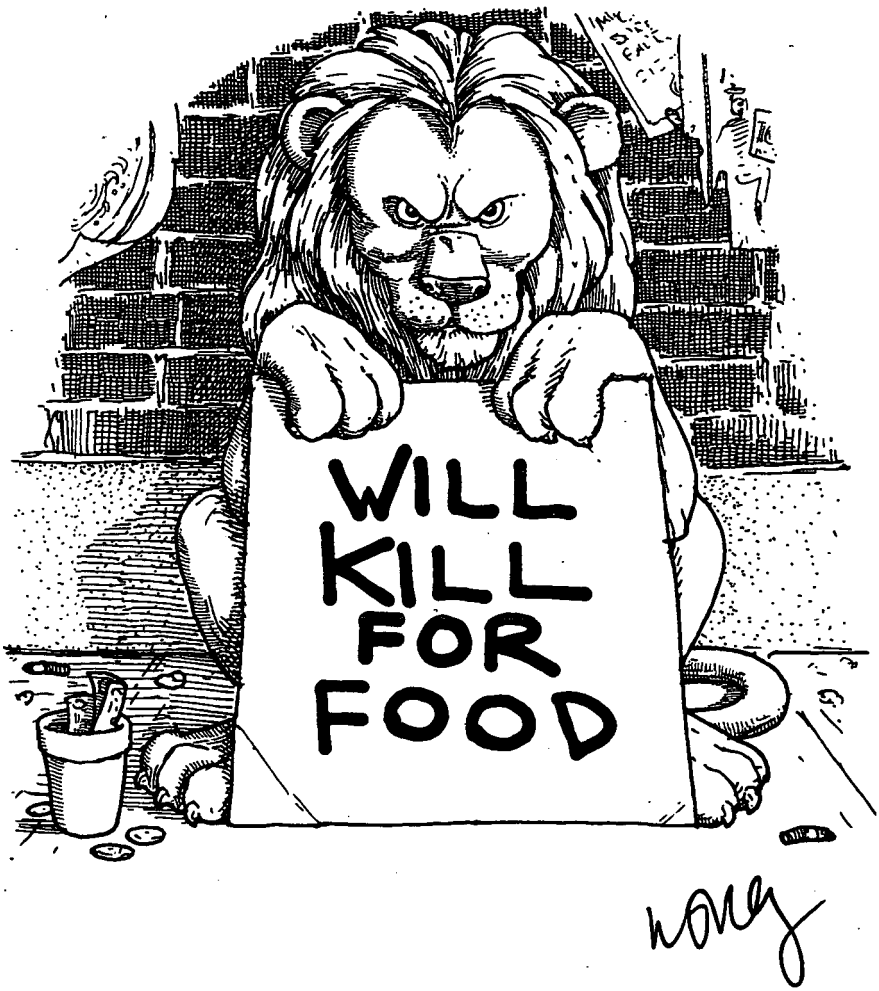
Louise stepped out the window. She clutched his arm, the wind whipping at her hair. The platform creaked rapidly up and out of sight.

Tsuyoshi stood up from the chair. When he stretched out, tugging at his handcuffed wrist, he was just able to reach his pokkecon with his fingertips. He drew it in, and clutched it to his chest. Then he sat down again, and waited patiently for someone to come and give him freedom.



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Alien Influences, by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Bantam Spectra, 1997, $5.99

HERE'S MY question for sf writers: why do so many planets in sf novels have one basic defining feature? Ice planet. Jungle planet. Or, in the case of the book in hand, desert planet. When you consider that these writers live on a planet where the landscape and climate can change dramatically in only a couple of hundred miles, you'd think they would reflect that same diversity in their creations. And that doesn't even begin to take into account the variance of races, cultures, religions, etc., existing here on earth that get distilled down to singularities on most sf authors' planets.

There. I have that off my chest. A moot point, perhaps. After all, the limited palette, if I may call it that, has a long tradition in our genre. And it's certainly less complicated for the purposes of most stories to have such shorthand environmental/cultural descriptions for individual planets. But still, it's a question that arises in my mind every time I run across it in a novel.

Alien Influences opens on Bountiful, an inhospitable desert planet colonized by a small community of humans who harvest an intoxicant from native plants which they then export to other planets. When a handful of children are found ritually murdered in a manner reminiscent of the native inhabitants' puberty rites, a xenopsychologist is brought in from off-planet to investigate the link between the murders and the native population (known as Dancers because of their liquid movement).

The end result of his analysis of the situation is the arrest of a number of the surviving children, their minds considered to be polluted by "alien influences." The

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irony is that, while the children *have* been changed by the time they've spent with the Dancers, and they are certainly guilty of the deaths of their peers, their motives were not evil. They had hoped to speed the change from child to adult so that they could all legally leave the planet (known by colonists who had managed to escape as the Gateway to Hell). The evil lay in the officials in charge of Bountiful who hoped to use the murders as an excuse to kill off the Dancers since the Dancers were no longer necessary in the production of the export drugs.

Rusch explores the results of the chaos that ensues from a number of viewpoints, over a period of some thirty years, and she does a tremendous job in considering them from all angles: the xenopsychologist, various officials involved in the original investigation, and of course, the accused children themselves. The novel should appeal to all those who love the psychological and anthropological questions surrounding the interaction between humans and aliens. If you enjoyed the earlier novels of Le Guin, and Card's "Ender" series, I'm sure you'll find *Alien Influences* as absorbing.

***

Dustcovers, by Dave McKean, Vertigo/DC Comics, 1997, $39.95

It feels a bit odd to open a monograph by a "comic book artist" and discover the collection of beautifully reproduced fine art that makes up Dave McKean's *Dustcovers*. But then McKean is only peripherally a comic book artist. His illustrated stories have rarely followed the traditions of the comic book field and his covers have always owed far more to fine art than the current "*artiste du jour*" of the comic book crowd.

Collected here are all the covers from the entire run of *The Sandman*, complete with commentaries by both McKean and Neil Gaiman, who was responsible for the scripts of every issue. McKean's work is a collage of manipulated photos, paint, found objects, and (in the later works) computer graphics. It's not art that will appeal to everyone, but then the best art doesn't. Instead, what's collected here presents a singular view of a very talented man whose finished work, at least one gathers from the commentaries, is a mix of careful consideration and happy accidents.

Also included is an eight-page story by Gaiman, illustrated by McKean. "The Last Sandman Story" is quirky and anecdotal, but no less

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enchanting for that, and it flows well into the subsequent commentaries penned by the two. The design of the whole package is stunning, and if the reproductions of the art aren't close to the originals, no doubt only McKean can tell.

The forty dollar price tag might seem a bit steep, but then artist's monographs are usually in that price range, or higher, and one assumes that a trade paperback edition will be forthcoming in 1998.

The Forgetting Room, by Nick Bantock, HarperCollins, 1997, $29.95

Nick Bantock, of "Griffin & Sabine" fame, returns with another mix of art and story. This time he presents the journal of a bookbinder named Armon who travels to Spain to settle the affairs of his recently deceased grandfather — an artist Armon hasn't seen since he was eleven. Armon used to spend his summers with his grandfather, learning art that he eventually gave up in lieu of the craft of bookbinding.

Returning to his grandfather's studio, Armon discovers a puzzle that leads him back to making art himself once more, as well as learning secrets concerning his grandfather. Without spoiling the story, and within its context, I have to say it works well. *The Forgetting Room* is a prime example of someone from outside the genre coming up with what seems like a great idea, except it's one that's been done many times before in the sf/f field. From the dustcover copy, it appears that the publisher finds the turning point of Bantock's plot to be highly original as well — a sad commentary on the insularity of the various genre partitions of the publishing world.

But the joy of a Bantock book isn't so much the actual plot of the book as *how* he tells a story. It's the mix of art and words, the pamphlets that fold out from the page, the triptych that opens, the process of watching a sketch turn into a painting over a number of pages. His prose seems stronger this time out, as well, as though he's growing as assured with his use of words as he has long been with an artist's tools. And as I mentioned above, the climactic moment, while it won't be a surprise for any reader of sf/f, still pays off in terms of the story.

Dean Koontz: A Writer's Biography, by Katherine Ramsland, HarperPrism, 1997, $24.

Reading this book was somewhat of an odd experience for me as

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it was the first time I've read a biography of someone I actually know. I ended up feeling like a bit of a voyeur, as though I was looking in through a window I shouldn't be, since usually the subject of such books has been dead for however many years and lived far away from me, in both place and time. Not that Dean and I are particularly close. We met some time ago while we were both judges for the World Fantasy Awards. During that process there was quite a flurry of phone calls and we've kept up a desultory correspondence since then. But still.

From the cover copy and promotional material accompanying the book, it appears that Katherine Ramsland has written quite a few books on Anne Rice, so it struck me as curious that she chose Koontz as her next subject. It's true that both authors have written on dark themes, but Rice's prose has always seemed somewhat over the top — dense, Gothic, sprawling — while Koontz's work is focused, the language evocative, yet always precise, the prime concerns being character and story. The appeal of one's work doesn't seem to cross over to the other's readily.

Be that as it may, Ramsland has obviously done exhaustive research. She illuminates the long struggle Koontz has had to reach his present level of achievement, and one comes away from the book with a great admiration for his work ethics and world view. I didn't always agree with her assessments of his books, but then I don't look for hidden meanings in novels anyway. I believe that if an author has something he or she wishes to say, they will say it. All the analyzing in the world won't make a difference to how effectively the author's actual text gets the message across.

Still, it's an enjoyable book that should appeal to Koontz's many readers, containing a complete bibliography of his work and a great number of quotes from Ramsland's interviews with Koontz, allowing him to speak often in his own voice. Happily, she also mentions that Koontz is planning an autobiography, and that's certainly something to look forward to. Until then, Ramsland's book stands in admirably.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

DOUGLAS E. WINTER

"Even if he was half Satan, wasn't he half her as well, half decent, ordinary, sensible, human being?"

— Ira Levin, *Rosemary's Baby*

THIRTY YEARS ago, the novel *Rosemary's Baby* brought a new and discomforting edge to the emerging paranoia of the American sixties. It was an instant classic — and bestseller. Its young author, Ira Levin, had cast the first stone of a coming landslide in popular fiction: the mass-marketed novel of supernatural horror. In its wake would come William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), the gothic novels of Thomas Tryon, and the early works of Stephen King and Peter Straub, as the fiction of fear rose from its postwar grave to claim readers in the millions.

Rosemary's Baby is an exceptional novel and worthy of re-reading, if only because it is remembered by many through Roman Polanski's effective film adaptation, which starred John Cassavetes and Mia Farrow, in her finest role, as Rosemary. Levin created, with elegant simplicity, a drama of domestic disquietude and betrayal whose consequences spin unnervingly from the personal to the metaphysical. Rosemary Reilly, a blissfully naive midwesterner and recently lapsed Catholic, ventures to Manhattan, marries a handsome but struggling actor, and moves into a charming apartment, where her hopes of becoming the wife and mother of the American Dream are not merely shattered but defiled: She is beguiled by her conniving husband and a coven of elderly satanists into sleeping with Lucifer and bearing the Son of Darkness. Deftly told, the novel works as a thriller, a cautionary parable, and a striking commentary on a time when the roles of women, and our elders, were questioned and changing.

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Levin had honed his talent writing for television in its "golden age" and published a well-received first novel, *A Kiss Before Dying*, in 1953; but *Rosemary's Baby*, his second novel, did not appear for another fourteen years. He had been consumed by a career as playwright that began with *No Time for Sergeants*; but with his occult masterpiece, Levin returned to the novel more frequently, creating the likes of *The Stepford Wives* (1972), *The Boys from Brazil* (1976) and, more recently, *Sliver* (1991), while making a hugely successful return to Broadway with *Deathtrap* (1978).

A sequel is usually risky business, and it is rare for a writer to revisit territory left unexplored for decades. *Son of Rosemary* (Dutton, $22.95) seeks to explore the question left unanswered in the final pages of *Rosemary's Baby:* Why? In the intervening years, answers have been proposed by a made-for-television production, *Look What's Happened to Rosemary's Baby* (1976) as well as the motion picture *The Omen* (1976) and its two sequels, which depicted the birth of an Antichrist and his rise to corporate and political power.

As his title suggests, Levin is not taking things too seriously, which, in retrospect, seems a mistake. *Son of Rosemary* proceeds with a nod-and-wink sense of artifice, foregoing the ambition of its predecessor in favor of pure amusement.

The plot is suitably preposterous: In November 1999, Rosemary awakens in a hospital bed, the victim of a coma that has claimed twenty-odd years of her life, courtesy of the coven that helped sire her infamous baby. She soon learns that her baby Andrew has grown into Mr. Perfect — dashing multimillionaire, philanthropist, and all-around nice guy. He is the head of God's Children, a multinational foundation dedicated to world peace; and, he assures Rosemary, he has overcome the stain of Daddy Darkest.

Rosemary's man has conceived the ultimate showbiz gesture to mark the new millennium: On December 31, 1999, everyone in the world will put aside their differences and light a candle to honor peace. Forget the fact that the date is off by at least a year — is there something devilish in his grin? Might the special candles spawn some deadly toxin intended to wipe out the human race? Or is Rosemary merely paranoid?

Actually, dear Rosemary is clueless, and her character soon

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strains the reader's patience. After all, this is the woman who was duped into becoming Lucifer's bedmate; surely she would be less gullible this time around. Try though Levin may to justify her refusal to see the truth, he simply can't persuade the reader that Rosemary is anything but a fool.

Like the original novel, *Son of Rosemary* hinges on a riddle — an anagram that, on this occasion, Levin declines to solve for the reader. Add in the jovial style and the accomplished sleight-of-hand at the finale, and there's a striking sense that we've been told a shaggy — goat? — story.

Another writing veteran has returned with a psychological suspense novel that is smaller in scope but more profound in its impact. Donald E. Westlake's *The Ax* (Mysterious Press, $23) takes the pathology of serial murder into a unique and bleakly humorous realm. Burke Devore, a paper company manager, is out of a job after twenty-five years, another victim of corporate downsizing. His trying search for new employment in a shrinking industry leads him, with cool logic, to find the position he wants and then plot the murder of the man who holds it — and, in order to assure success, to first kill the other likely candidates for the job. This provocative excursion into sociopathic obsession is an entertaining and original entry in the serial crime subgenre.

A more literal version of the ax haunts a new novel by Dennis Etchison. *Double Edge* (Dell, $5.50) is an American giallo, a who-(or what-)done-it structured around a sequence of unsolved crimes that progresses with relentless inevitability toward the protagonist — in this case, Jenny Marlow, creator of a television miniseries intended to re-examine and "solve" the murders said to have been committed by Lizzie Borden. When people close to Jenny and her project start dying, suspicions veer into the realms of insanity and the supernatural, and the solution naturally entwines with that of one of America's more famous crimes.

Far more satisfying is Etchison's best novel, and the first to appear under his own name: *Darkside* (1986). A special tenth-anniversary edition of the book, and its first hardcover state, has been issued in a 750-copy limited edition signed by Etchison and Ramsey Campbell, who provides an introduction (American Fantasy and Airgedlamh Publications, $35). Its "preferred"

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text has been "corrected and restored" by the author, principally by deletion of a section written at the behest of the original publisher. In either version, *Darkside* is consummate California Gothic, prefiguring the likes of Bret Easton Ellis and Todd Grimson in its depiction of Left Coast dysfunction but told in a more intimate and seductive style that echoes Etchison's best work in short fiction. The anniversary edition is available in the United States ($38 postage paid) from Robert T. Garcia, P.O. Box 41714, Chicago IL 60641.

Prominent among this year's releases is a vital new novel by Thomas Tessier, *Fog Heart* (St. Martin's Press, $22.95). I've written elsewhere that Tessier is horror fiction's best kept secret, and *Fog Heart*, a truly unsettling story of loss and desire, merely confirms that he is one of the most capable and conscientious writers to grace the contemporary field. The novel follows the gently intersecting stories of two couples whose lives are rocked with seeming intrusions by the dead, leading them to the mysteries of a beautiful yet haunted medium. From this seemingly traditional plot evolves a fiction that is disturbingly different and that, as we have come to expect from Tessier, pushes generic impulses in refreshing directions.

Big Thunder, the second novel by Peter Atkins (HarperCollins-UK, £16.99), is a surreal work of wonder that melds horror's past with its present. A young New Yorker, Avis Llewellen, is haunted by a spectral vision in a tuxedo who is soon revealed as the Blue Valentine, a pulp fiction vigilante whose justice was ultraviolent and terminal. This elegant avenger finds life in the nineties — and outside the world of fiction — when his now-elderly creator falls into a coma, and with life comes the ancient urge to bring death. His murderous ambitions embrace a new medium, imagining an apocalyptic motion picture that will ravage its audiences.

Old meets new in a more traditional sense in several recent volumes reprinting fiction of historical significance.

Tales of H.P. Lovecraft (Ecco Press, $23), selected and introduced by Joyce Carol Oates, presents ten stories otherwise available in paperback and, of course, Arkham House hardcovers. The choices are not particularly surprising: Lovecraft's canon is small and inconsistent, and the short list is virtually inevitable. The significance here is Oates's imprimatur, and her

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welcome insights place Lovecraft firmly within an American Gothic tradition, using "gothic" in an honest analytical sense and not as mere sugar to make the bad medicine of horror go down. The collection is a fine starting point for newcomers and doubting academics.

The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft (Dell, $12.95) is edited and introduced by the pre-eminent Lovecraft scholar, S.T. Joshi, author of a recent and, to quote his Johnson, Cyclopean biography, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life* (Necronomicon Press, P.O. Box 1304, West Warwick RI 02893, $20). Joshi is genuinely obsessed with Lovecraft's life and work, and his formidable apologia suffers only from the heft of its detail. In *The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft,* he offers an informative prelude and four well-known stories: "The Rats in the Walls," "The Colour Out of Space," "The Dunwich Horror," and Lovecraft's masterpiece, *At the Mountains of Madness.*

At his best moments, Joshi exercises his encyclopedic grasp of Lovecraftiana to cross-reference other texts by Lovecraft and his influences, including the likes of Arthur Machen and, of course, Poe and Dunsany. The notes occasionally parse through Lovecraft's legendary bouts of adjectivitis, solving the meanings of "nefandous," "squamous" and, of course, "eldritch." Clearly this is a volume for enthusiasts.

In the wake of the curious embrace of science fiction at the latter-day Arkham House, another small press in the northlands, Fedogan & Bremer, has stepped forward as the leading champion of short fiction from (or evoking) the pulp era. Recent releases of note include *Don't Dream,* an omnibus collection of the horror and fantasy fiction of Arkham House cofounder Donald Wandrei (F&B, $29); *The Door Below,* offering "strange mystery" tales that span the fifty-year writing career of Hugh B. Cave (F&B, $27); and *The Vampire Stories of R. Chetwynd-Hayes,* edited by Stephen Jones with an introduction by Brian Lumley (F&B, $27). Each book is an intriguing look back at the rich history of the fiction of fear, offering a wealth of material that would otherwise be lost to time.

The most powerful and yet painful of the recent Fedogan & Bremer releases is *Exorcisms and Ecstasies,* a final collection of fiction by the late Karl Edward Wagner (F&B, $32). Edited by Stephen Jones, the book consists of stories that Wagner had assembled for publica-

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tion prior to his death, along with uncollected Kane stories, a novel fragment and two short stories about "dark gunslinger" Adrian Becker, and Wagner's remaining uncollected stories (including selected juvenalia). Interspersed among the fiction are memorial essays by Peter Straub, Ramsey Campbell, David J. Schow and others, which provide fond and occasionally brutal truths about the better days and alcoholic decline of a great yet wounded talent. Karl Wagner was one of but a handful of contemporary writers of the dark fantastic whose fiction successfully melded pulp tradition with postmodern sensibilities. As writer and editor — and as a man — he is missed.

Douglas E. Winter
Oakton, Virginia
November/December 1997

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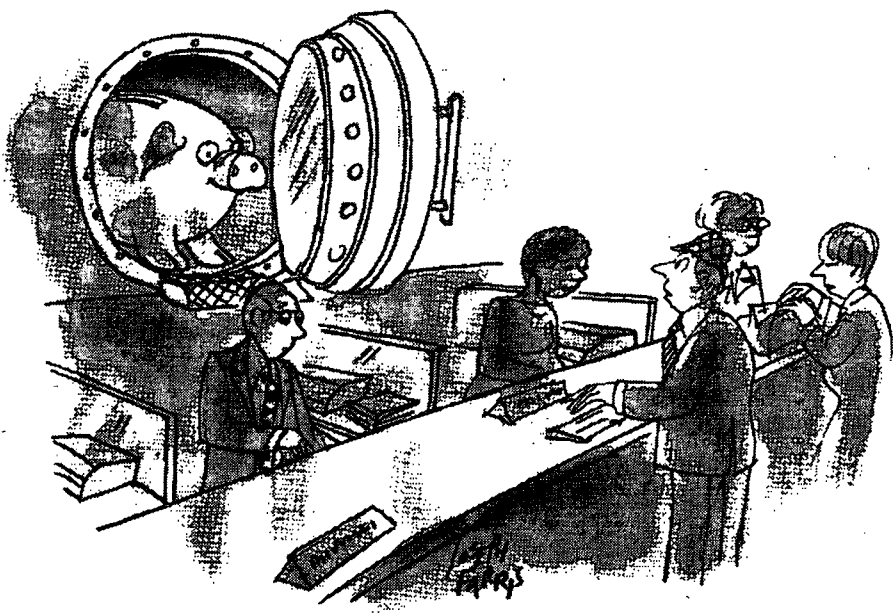

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EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

DAVID Hartwell makes it clear at once that his new anthology is premature. "The twentieth century is the science fiction century," he writes in *The Science Fiction Century* (Tor)...in 1997. But he notes that life doesn't neatly fit the patterns laid out by our calendars, and the gist of this book runs from Wells to Nancy Kress's "Beggars in Spain" (1991) and rejects earlier sf that Damon Knight collected in his 1962 anthology *A Century of Science Fiction*. Small matter. What we have is a grand assemblage of forty-five stories — including many novellas — set in small type that celebrates a wide variety of sf's traditions.

Hartwell's main argument is that sf "stands in opposition to literary Modernism. It is the paraliterary shadow of Modernism," and consequently Hartwell largely avoids anything with a Postmodern taint to it. (In fact, I believe he never uses the words "New Wave.") So if you're looking for stories with a bit more of an experimental edge to them and some literary self-consciousness — as well as more awareness of popular culture — turn instead to such collections as John Kessel's *The Pure Product* (Tor), Paul Di Filippo's *Fractal Paisleys* (Four Walls Eight Windows), Kit Reed's *Weird Women; Wired Women* (Wesleyan Univ. Press), or *The Wall of the Sky, the Wall of the Eye* by Jonathan Lethem (Orb). All four books have lots of lively reading. Kessel's pure product includes most of the contents of his previous collection, *Meeting in Infinity*, and is probably the most varied of the four, but in this wild crowd, that's like calling one chameleon more colorful than another. Look again and things may well have changed.

If you're in a very postmodern mood, David Bowman's *Bunny Modern* (Little, Brown) is worth a look. The novel is not hardcore sf, but it's set in a speculative future wherein Con Edison rules New

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York. The book is much too coy at times, but the story is interesting and very, very offbeat.

One book that is hardcore sf — and very good — is Gregory Benford's *Cosm*. It's really a scientific mystery novel, and the mystery is engaging: what is this big ball that resulted from the impact of uranium atoms in a supercollider? The answer is exactly the sort of speculation that makes sf what it is.

Another hardcore sf novel is Joe Haldeman's *Forever Peace* (Ace)...at first glance, anyway. But what looks like a future war novel defies expectations and turns instead into more of a spy thriller. While the book is billed as a thematic sequel to *The Forever War*, it feels closer in theme and tone to Haldeman's *1968*. Either way, it holds its own in this good company.

I discovered Sue Woolfe's *Leaning Towards Infinity* (Faber) because it was nominated for last year's Tiptree Award, and I'm glad I did. This near-future story of a family of math geniuses doesn't have much real science content, but it's extremely well-written and a very good read. The fact that it earned an award nomination demonstrates again the wonderful diversity and boundless nature of the sf field.

—*GVG*

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Maybe you can help out—it seems there ought to be a good punch line to the question "What did the editor say to the former editor?" Any good lines escape me. The reality is that when I speak with Kris Rusch lately, I mention to her how busy I am...and she laughs knowingly. Then I realized that her SF novel Alien Influences *and her mainstream novel* Hitler's Angel *came out within months of each other, and I learned that the manuscript for* Victory, *the fifth and final volume of "The Fey" series, requires a ream and a half of paper and I think that laugh of hers is more than just knowing. It's almost ominous. Fortunately, Kris is not too busy to send an occasional tale our way...*

The Questing Mind

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

HE TRIES TO REMEMBER. The nurses don't understand that. They think it odd that he requests audio tapes of the books he has written, videos of the interviews he has given, and photograph albums of times past. The nurses also give him three-d moving pictures of his last few years, pictures so tiny they rest in the palm of his hand. In them, the people turn like toy dolls, but he cannot feel their feet against his skin. Outside the door, he hears the nurses whispering, "Sad old man. He's got nothing left to live for, so he lives in his past."

Only he doesn't have any memories except inconsequential ones: the runny eggs he had for breakfast, the plot of the crime drama he watched the night before on the wide screen television placed at the perfect distance from his bed. He has a superficial knowledge of everything he has done, like a back-of-the-book bio sheet written about someone else:

J. Reed Brasher, novelist, playwright, and essayist, born 1920 in Camden, New Jersey to physician Paul Brasher and his wife Mary.

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Published his first novel, *Golden Sunset*, in 1945. Wrote sixteen Broadway plays, including the Tony Award winning *Stations in the Sky* (1960). Published five books of essays, the last an autobiographical sketch. Married Olive Franklin in 1942, fathered two daughters, Mary and Paula. List of publications (including all 55 novels) follows.

But the memories are gone, stolen an incident at a time. He had noticed the first one missing on his ninetieth birthday when his daughter, Paula, asked him to recite her favorite bedtime story to his great-grandson. He did not remember telling bedtime stories, and said so. She reminded him of that only this morning, when he asked what day she first noticed his memory slipping.

"It's normal, Dad. The mind goes with age."

But not his mind. His mind has controlled his entire life. He knows that with the same certainty with which he knows he is male. He remembers the feeling of control, but he does not remember the incidents that triggered it.

It is the ultimate curse. His body is now so feeble that he cannot spend much time out of bed. If he does, the nurses come after him as if he were a child. "Now, now, Mr. Brasher, we mustn't hurt ourselves."

He wonders how he can hurt himself in this house he has built — he saw the documentation in the photo album: his younger self standing over the blueprints, holding a hammer, speaking to a contractor. He chose the big brass feather bed, the ruby bedspread with matching carpet and curtains that set off the mahogany paneling. It is soothing to sleep in this room with his books and posters lining the walls, this place he has been for fifty years. It is like living in his own mind.

This morning he woke with the thought that the longer he remains passive, the sooner the thief will take his entire being. Until his daughter made her casual remark, he was willing to let his brain slip away drop by drop. But she was wrong. Age should equal wisdom, and somewhere, someone is stealing his wisdom from him. He cannot allow this to continue.

He needs a plan. A simple plan to prevent the destruction of his mind. A plan that will save the little bit he has left.

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He reads until he dozes off. Each word is an effort, each sentence a battle he must fight to the end. He reads only two pages before his head lolls against the pillows. When he awakes, the side of his mouth is wet. He drools in his sleep, like an old man. He hates thinking of himself as old.

He has spoken to the nurses. They pat his arm, and refuse to answer him until he gets agitated. They say different doctors have different opinions, but no one will tell him what those opinions are.

He investigates various diseases on his own. But, as he reads, and sleeps, and reads some more, he realizes his symptoms are not neatly categorized. He can learn and remember from day to day if he tries. The information he has lost all seems to fit into part of the same whole.

He cannot remember his work, although he can remember setting pen to paper. But he does not try to write. That drive left him first, as if fleeing from a crisis about to happen.

It takes half a day before he realizes that detail is a memory. He can pinpoint the day he lost his will to create, pinpoint it without anyone else's help.

He was sitting downstairs in the solarium he built for Olive. She had been dead a year, and in that time, he discovered that the only way he could feel close to her was to sit in that overheated room she loved. He had to hire someone to tend her plants, and even then they didn't look right. But the light coming through the window, that was right and always would be, and he knew if he turned his head just one certain way that he would see her again, that she hid in the periphery of his vision like a car in his blind spot. He knew he should write about the loss as he had written about everything else in his life, record it for some future even he couldn't fathom, but for the first time since he knew the alphabet he didn't want to make a record.

And then he had a double loss, first of Olive, then of himself.

It was only a short walk from the solarium to the bed. In six months he has become a bed-ridden drooling old man whose emaciated form more resembles a starving man in a magazine ad than the famous, well-photographed writer, robust from too much good food and not enough exercise. The loss is not related to Olive for he wrote before he knew her and he wrote after she died.

No. The loss has a physical cause, and he will find it.

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On the third day of his quest, he waits until the nurses take their lunch. He can hear a soap opera at high volume in the kitchen, some hapless heroine sobbing about murder in the arms of her lover. He uses the glittering metal knob attached to the plastic headboard to pull himself out of bed. His legs are unsteady, but he manages to traverse the bedroom. The carpet from bed to door seems as long as the Sahara. He has to lean against the frame and pant to get his wind. Has he forgotten to eat in those six weeks? Or did the doctors order some low-calorie fare that failed to nourish him? All he remembers is burnt toast, cold soup and roast beef sandwiches made mostly of gristle. Whoever hired those nurses did not hire them for their cooking ability.

After a few minutes he catches his breath and staggers down the hall, as wobbly as a child taking his first steps.

Instantly he gets a picture: Paula toddling toward him, hands outstretched, joy on her pudgy face. He owns that one, and Mary too, balancing herself with one hand on the couch, the other knocking his magazines off the coffee table, Olive's three-note laugh echoing in the background. He blinks back tears, so grateful to have photographs in his head that he stumbles and nearly falls. He catches the wall to steady himself and listens for heavy nursy footsteps on the stairs, but the television blares coffee percolating music, and after a moment he realizes they aren't going to come.

When he reaches the door of his study, he stops. The area around it smells faintly of pipe smoke and he catches a glimpse of a memory before it disappears into the recesses of his brain. This room is gone from his head. If he opens the door, he will see a room he designed as if it were assembled by a stranger.

He does not know what he will find.

The thought fills him with apprehension. Even so, he reaches down and grabs the knob. It turns, but the door does not open. The knob feels strange to his palm. He pulls his hand away. This knob does not match the others in the house. It is square and has a red light pulsing in the center. He recognizes it from the magazine on his bedstand — a private in-house security system, keyed to one person's specifications.

He lets out a silent moan. He must have bought that system and

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installed it. But he cannot remember doing so, nor can he remember the code.

He leans against the frame, exhaustion making his limbs shudder. The television blares menacing music that leads to another set of commercials. The show will end soon. He has to get back to his bed before the nurses find him.

As he makes his way back, hand pressed against the wall, he wishes for a cane. Something to lean on to make his passage easier. It isn't until he reaches the Sahara carpet that he thinks to wonder at the lock itself: who was he trying to keep out of his study? Until he became ill, he lived alone.

HE DEMANDS to see the doctors, and the nurses drive him to cold sterile offices: the first on Rodeo Drive near all the exclusive shops. This child with bright red hair, the nurse tells Brasher, is his personal doctor, the person who has treated him for the last sixteen years.

Brasher doesn't recognize him.

Nor does he recognize the waiting room: Empty except for him, filled with blue chairs that matched the blue carpet and the white walls. No magazines lie on the table. Instead someone has installed a television set in front of each seat, and thoughtfully provided the viewer with a remote.

The examining room is even colder than the waiting room. He sits on the gurney with his clothes on, feeling naked nonetheless, wishing he could lie down, but knowing that he shouldn't. The doctor treats him like a baby, and speaks in that sing-song voice reserved for children, the mentally unstable, and those who don't speak English.

"Sometimes," the doctor says, "the mind leaves before the body does. I'm sorry, Reed. I know this is hard for you, but you have enough money. You have lived a full life. Lie back for your remaining years and relax."

The advice of the young. Brasher asks a few more questions, all about the progression of the doctor's version of Brasher's disease, and learns that it matches his memories of himself: the quick onset (rare, the doctor says), the rapid deterioration (tragic, the doctor says, but understandable, given the loss of your wife). The doctor-child's eyes have no understanding, however, and Brasher wants to demand how the doctor would feel if it

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were his mind, his life, being eroded away bit by tiny bit.

But he does not. He did not come for compassion. He came for answers. He has received neither.

The second doctor's office is in a clinic on the revitalized section of Hollywood Boulevard. The clinic has a large sign over the door which announces a specialty in geriatric services. The waiting room is designed for people his daughter's age: Elvis Presley blares on the speakers, books line the walls, and photographs of Hollywood in the fifties and sixties rest beneath the glass on the coffee table. He does not feel old here: he feels ancient, as if he should have died years ago.

This doctor is a woman in her forties, the age of his granddaughter Kimberly. The woman is not attractive: middle age has lined her mouth, sagged her breasts, and flattened her buttocks. She, at least, has compassion. It appears to be what has wearied her. Since they are alone, she sits across from him in the waiting room, a file folder clasped to her chest like a shield, and tells him in a gentle voice that some people become children in their old age.

"I am not a child," he says. "I simply cannot remember my life."

They discuss his symptoms. She agrees that he has no classic symptoms for any disease which attacks the mind. But she reminds him that no one is classic, and that even now, no one understands the human brain.

"Except the computer programmers," he says, thinking he is making a joke. Sitting in this room designed to ease people younger than he is has put him on edge.

The doctor starts. She has obviously not expected his joke. Finally she smiles. "I believe the computer people are working on *artificial* intelligence," she says.

He is tiring visibly when they finish their discussion. She sends for his nurse/chauffeur and then touches his hand before she leaves the room. "You are more fortunate than some, Mr. Brasher," she says, that compassion enveloping him like a hug. "You at least wrote about your life. Perhaps you knew this time would come all along."

Her words send a chill through him and he remembers, oh, so briefly remembers how it felt to be young and whole and in control of his world. "No," he says to her. "I did not know this would happen, but I was afraid it would."

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He sleeps, on and off, for the two days after his excursion, and each time he awakes, he curses the exhaustion that will not leave him. He wants to think, but finds it tiring and so he sleeps instead.

On the morning of the third day, he wakes with a restlessness it takes him a while to identify: it is energy. He has finally regained some of his strength.

And he has an idea. The female doctor's words have echoed through his dreams: he needs an intelligence specialist. Computer experts have studied the mind for most of his life. He will have someone make a map of the deterioration of his brain. He knows just the person to do it.

He picks up the phone beside his bed, hits the speed dial button marked with his nephew Scott's name, and asks — no, demands — that Scott join him for dinner. Scott's voice holds the tolerance one gives to the eccentric in the family, tolerance touched with urgency, with the knowledge that he might not have discussions with his uncle Reed much longer. Brasher recognizes the tone: his voice has held it too, but for whom and when he cannot remember.

He closes his eyes in frustration and hopes enough of his mind will be left by dinner so that he can have a meaningful, life-saving conversation with his sister's son.

The man who eats from the tray at Brasher's bedside is not a boy, but a person who is crossing the threshold of old age. He is balding, and his features are wide and square. The cartilage in his nose has softened, flattening it against his jowly face. Only the eyes are familiar: bright and green and shining with intelligence.

The nurses have served roast beef obviously carved in a grocery store deli, gravy from a can, and mashed potatoes made from a mix. The preservatives give everything a flat flavor, except the potatoes, which have a gritty taste all their own. Scott eats carefully, flattening his potatoes so they melt into the gravy and pushing the gelatinous mess away from his roast beef. He will not look at Reed.

"It happens to everyone, Unc." Scott's right hand has lumpish knuckles and an age spot near the wrist. "We all get old."

"No," Reed says. "No one else in my family lost their mind."

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"Aunt Olive did, at the end, remember?"

He remembers. But he chooses to believe that his wife's personality simply died before her body did. "We were not related by blood," he says, gently.

Scott smiles and for the first time, Reed sees the boy he remembers trapped in the man's body. "I know that. But they think now that sometimes things like this happen because of environment. You two went everywhere together."

Reed shakes his head. "This is different. I've been reading — " he sweeps his hand at the bookshelf " — and my symptoms are unique." He clears his throat, runs his hand through his thinning hair, feeling the baldness pattern that is an advanced version of his nephew's. "I need your help. I want you to do a map of the deterioration of my brain."

Scott's eyes widen, and for a moment, color brushes his cheeks. He sets his fork down, brings the linen napkin to his mouth, and wipes. His hand shakes. Then he says in an oddly strained voice, "Unc, I haven't done any programming since college."

Reed frowns. "But computers are your specialty."

Scott shakes his head. "No. I play with computers, but I use other people's programs. Besides, this would take knowledge I don't have."

Reed slumps against his pillows. Even the thought that his knowledge of Scott comes from the memory of a boy instead of the reality of a man does not make him feel any better. Reed stares at the sheet, folded against the thick red comforter, the white cotton smudged with a dab of gravy.

"It feels as if a shadow is creeping across my brain," he says. "If we can shed light on it, then perhaps it will go away."

Scott puts his tray on the floor and buries his face in his hands. Reed glances at his nephew. They were close once, when Scott played with Reed's children at all the family gatherings, but there seems to be little closeness between them now. Not enough to cause Scott's reaction. Finally Scott brings his head up, his eyes hooded and unreadable, an expression so like Reed's father that Reed starts.

"All right, Unc," Scott says. "I know a man who can help you. I'll send him over tomorrow and we'll see what he can do."

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The man's name is Cielo Rodriguez, but he speaks no Spanish. "My mother chose the name," is all he will say, which puts his birthdate squarely within a five-year period that began in 1966. He is tall and slender, with wavy black hair and piercing blue eyes — a bit of *cielo*, he says — but Reed is uncertain whether the man means the sky or heaven. Rodriguez wears white to set off his dark skin. Thick corded muscle runs up his arms and into his shoulders, as if working with computers has made him very strong. He answers Reed's early questions as if he has answered them a thousand times.

They meet in the solarium because Reed does not want a stranger to see him in bed. The warmth is a comfort for his old and aching bones. The nurses have put a stool in front of his favorite chair so that he can rest his feet. Even in his white shirt and lightweight pants, Rodriguez looks hot. Sweat beads on his forehead, an occasional drop falling off his brow onto his pristine clothes.

Reed does not like the small talk and doubts he ever had patience for it. He leans forward, his shoulder brushing a fern, and tells Rodriguez the brief history of his deterioration, then requests the map.

Rodriguez wipes at a trickle of sweat that has fallen onto his cheek. "Frankly," he says, "I am surprised you have come back to us."

Reed feels a little chill in the pit of his stomach. "Come back?"

"We did this five years ago," Rodriguez says with the cautious tone Reed is coming to recognize. "Both you and your wife. It was a big deal. The first successful mapping of the activities of the working, *intelligent* human brain. Made the cover of *Science News* and *Scientific American*."

And I can't believe you don't remember. That is what his tone said. *How could you ever forget?* Reed's breath is coming in small gasps. No wonder Scott looked so upset. The first time they probably sought him out. The second time, he sought them.

"If I'd known you were having troubles, I'd have come to you," Rodriguez says. "Just like we did for your wife."

"You made a second map of Olive?" Reed's voice rasps. His throat has tightened against the words.

Rodriguez shakes his head. "She wouldn't let us touch her again."

Reed doesn't move. He can feel Olive's presence all around him. The warmth envelops him like a hug. *Sometimes things like this happen*

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because of environment. You two went everywhere together. Or shared the same experiment.

"Could this be happening to me because of the map?" Reed asks. He does not look at Rodriguez, focusing instead on the small hothouse rose blooming on the third shelf to his left.

"No." Rodriguez leans forward into Reed's line of vision. Rodriguez places his face so that his piercing gaze meets Reed's. "We have done this technique a hundred times since and have used it as a diagnostic tool. No one else has had this problem."

Reed cannot look into that tiny bit of *cielo*. He turns away. "You sound awfully certain for a man who is experimenting."

"You used to like my certainty," Rodriguez says.

The words make Reed start. Another thing lost? He cannot tell.

Rodriguez stands. He pats Reed's shoulder with a familiarity that strangers should not have. "Come to Cedar Sinai tomorrow at nine A.M. and report to Neurology. We will have your new map in no time."

"Tomorrow," Reed whispers. The promise hangs in the air long after Rodriguez has left. The heat has become oppressive as if, in its weight, lingers Olive's disapproval.

THEY BEGIN WITH old-fashioned technologies, X-rays, an MRI, a PET and an AAL. Then they take him into a room he believes he has never seen before. This test has no acronym. He is placed on a divan, one of three in a room the size of his master bathroom. A technician places a device shaped like a hairdryer in a 1950s beauty salon over his head. His neck is held in place by a soft cushion. He is encouraged to close his eyes, but he is asked not to sleep.

He cannot sleep anyway. The room is air-conditioner cold, the kind of dry chill that seeps into his bones and brings goosebumps to his skin. Two people monitor him from the booth above — both women. He has not seen Rodriguez all morning.

All night he dreamed of Olive as she had been when he met her, her black hair held in rolls by ornate combs, her lipstick thick and red on her narrow mouth, her eyes snapping with a vitality that drew him like a thirsty man to water. At first he was happy, because he had found another

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untapped memory. They made love in a private rail car as it bumped and thudded along a steel track, their moans lost in the clatter. Then everything went dark, and he heard her voice, faint and quivering with age: *It's wrong, Reed. Please. Don't ask me again.*

As he closes his eyes now, he hears that voice, gone now almost two years and still buried inside him. *Don't ask me. Please, Reed. Please.* He has a sense of disquiet, as if the dreams have told him something he should understand. He allows his mind to free associate, as the technicians have told him to.

He is not asleep, but he is not awake, either. Finally the answer comes to him, firmly and with strength, his mind speaking with confidence for the first time since this ordeal began.

The visual memory is gone, but the audio remains.

He has been trying too hard. He needs to remember with his body, not with his mind.

This test is done, and the techs take him to another room, attach him to another machine. He barely notices; he is too engaged reviewing his small store of memories. The wobble of his legs brought back the children; the warmth of the solarium brought him Olive. Other memories are subtler: the taste of canned gravy brought the years of his young marriage and the boy Scott to his mind; the expression in Scott's eyes reviving for a brief instant Reed's father. The body is a link to a secondary store of memories, one he accesses in a different way than simple recall.

They complete two more tests before lunch. After lunch, the techs warn him, is the frightening part. They assure him he will feel nothing.

They take him to another white room, this one with a lounge and a series of wires hanging over it, like an old-fashioned dental chair. A young woman straps him in, explaining in a cheery voice that he has been through this once before. He has minute scars to prove it. Then she uses a tiny needle to inject a solution into his skull.

She is right; he feels nothing. Occasionally he makes an involuntary movement — a toe wiggles, a finger twitches — but otherwise he seems to be in control of himself. Over lunch, the techs tried to explain the process to him, using words like Virtual Imaging and Composite Mapping, but the jargon passes him too quickly. He will have Rodriguez explain, later.

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When she finishes, she takes him to a room and lets him sleep — a much needed, dreamless rest. He does not see Rodriguez until the following morning.

Reed is still exhausted. They meet in Rodriguez's office, a cramped room piled with print-outs and curling photographs, X-rays, and photographs of the brain. Computers hum on three desks. Framed degrees proclaim Rodriguez a medical doctor as well as a computer scientist. Magazine covers hide the part of the wall not covered with bookshelves. If Reed squints, he can see the *Scientific American* cover with the map of his brain.

The same map rises from the surface of one of the desks. A holographic projection. Reed half-smiles. An old memory must have led him to expect the map on one of the computer screens. A similar map rises from another desk. Rodriguez stares at them as if they hold secrets he cannot fathom. The light from the maps reflects on his face, making his dark skin as pale as his clothes.

"I have never seen anything like this," he says.

Reed has to fight to concentrate on the words. The exhaustion and strain have made him dizzy. He leans forward, ignoring the complaints of his back.

"Look." Rodriguez swivels the two models so that they face Reed. "You're right. You are losing information, but the loss is not starting in the corner of one lobe and moving in the other direction. Instead it follows pathways as we would follow a road, as if it is searching for particular kinds of information. It is as if these areas are washed clean."

He turns and faces Reed. The light from the maps shines over Rodriguez's shoulders, giving him a halo. "If this is a disease, it is unlike anything we have ever seen before."

Reed frowns. "Are you saying I'm all right?"

"No." Rodriguez temples his fingers. "Something is clearly wrong. The links remain — you can relearn things, but the knowledge you've stored is gone, and that knowledge seems to be specialized. With more time, we can figure out what areas are being affected."

"Today?" Reed asks.

Rodriguez shakes his head. "You're too tired. A week from now. Will that work for you?"

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Reed nods. Then asks the question he has been thinking since the day before. "Is this what happened to Olive?"

"We don't know." Rodriguez wipes his hand on his pants. He turns slightly, so that he can look at the screen instead of Reed. "She would not let us map her brain before she died, and she insisted that no one touch it after. You cremated her so that we would all comply with her wishes."

Reed stares at the revolving brains before him. The second is webbed with thin lines not in the first, as if someone has poured a dark liquid into the blood vessels to touch up the shadows. It is as if Death has snuck inside him and is snuffing out his life, inch by painful inch.

He sleeps for another two days. The sheets in the bed are damp from his sweat. His pillow feels hard and once he dreams he is trapped in an old CT machine, a room-sized monstrosity that sucks him dry.

On the third day, he awakens with a sense of loss. He runs through his feeble store of memories and stumbles. When he wobbled down the hall days before, he uncovered a memory, but now he can no longer find it. His head hurts with the strain of looking for it; his mind plays with the emptiness like the tongue plays with the space left by a missing tooth. He even gets out of bed and wobbles a bit, hoping the memory will return. But it is gone, like the others, perhaps forever.

A terror shudders through him, quick as alcohol on an empty stomach. He should not lose memories he has struggled to recover. Even Rodriguez said his brain was fine. The new memories should stay.

With a shaking hand, Reed reaches for the phone and calls Rodriguez. All Reed gets is Rodriguez's automated voice, urging him to leave a message. Which he does. All garbled and fear-filled, sounding more like a hysterical old man than he has ever sounded in his memory, as paltry as it is.

Then he gets out of bed, determined to try the hall again, to see if recreating the same circumstances will bring the memory back. He grips the plastic headboard and pauses for a moment. His taste is not that bad. A brass bed should have a brass board. Someone must have changed it. He does not know why.

As he crosses the Sahara carpet, each step is slow and uncertain. Even though he feels he has made some progress with his mind, his body's

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deterioration continues. His hands, outstretched before him for balance, are thin and bony, their flesh loose and lined with oversized blue veins. When he reaches the door's threshold, he grips it and leans into the hallway. The television blares below: the CNN news theme this time. If he were to cry for help, the nurses would never hear him.

He turns back to the hallway itself, wide enough for a wheelchair, filled with polished occasional tables and framed art that once had meaning for him. Keeping one hand firmly pressed against the dry wall, he takes small baby steps, then stops.

This was the place he had the memory. He remembers the moment of recovery, the joy that ran through him, the feel as if he had recaptured part of himself. Odd that he can recall remembering but the memory itself is gone. He inches closer to the wall and rests his head on the back of his hand. Little shudders run through him. Someday it will all be gone and he will be a great hulking empty shell of loose skin and brittle bones.

As Olive had been. She left before her body did, but where she went he had no idea. A tiny thread of despair fills him. She never left him before without telling him where she was going to go.

Another memory. But he knows it is not the same as the one he has lost. And this new memory has come through his body again, through the tactile image of a vacant shell. He cannot see Olive's dead body, but he remembers how it felt — like a beloved robe tossed on a bed — threadbare, worn, full of memories, but empty without its owner.

"Mr. Brasher?"

He starts. A nurse is beside him, her large breasts pressing against his arm, her uniform smelling of perfumed laundry detergent and sweat.

"You need to be in bed, Mr. Brasher."

He glances at her — rounded cheeks and chocolate eyes. She is younger than he realized, perhaps twenty-five, but already set in a middle-aged body. Her voice has a warmth she does not have to fake, and her breath is laced with garlic. He has succumbed to this gentle persuasion before.

Then he looks down the hall. Only a few feet remain to his study. The red light on the door knob blinks. "I know," he says, "but I need to do this more."

He pushes away from the wall and almost loses his balance. She places

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a firm hand on the small of his back to steady him. He walks without support now, embarrassed by his old man's gait. After he walks a few steps, he hears a sharp intake of breath. She must have realized where he is going.

"Mr. Brasher, sir, you can't go in there."

He stops in front of the study door. The faint aroma of pipe tobacco brings up a wistfulness in him. He gazes at the tiny blinking light reflecting off the translucent skin of his right arm. "If I can't go in there," he says, "who can?"

She apparently has no answer. He closes his eyes and grips the knob. The corners bite into his skin. The metal is cool beneath his palm, except in the center, where the light blinks. He has felt this before. His own voice speaks in his head and he repeats the words, the quote he chose to release the lock: "'Go then! Go to the moon, you selfish dreamer!'"

And he hears not his own voice, but a raspy female voice in a room tinged with whiskey, the words echoing across a stage, and sees a young girl, dressed in white, the spotlight on her hand, cupping a broken unicorn from her glass menagerie. And he knows then what he has lost: that magic, that music perfection could raise in him: the tears he cried when he first saw Ibsen and Williams and O'Neill performed upon the stage, the glimmer of inspiration that made him want to do the same things. He remembers the feel of the velvet-covered steel theater chair, the collective gasp of the audience, the instinctive grasping in his soul that made him want to achieve uniformity of emotion in a hundred people sitting in the dark. He is so lost inside himself that he does not notice as the knob slips through his grasp. Only the cool hand upon his arm brings him to the present.

"Come inside, old man," says a voice he recognizes. "It's time we talk."

It takes a moment for his eyes to focus. As they do, he finds himself gazing at skin so flawless that it lacks the visible imperfections of open pores or bristly whiskers. The lips are smooth, a rosy hue he has never seen outside of commercials; the nose a flawless aquiline missing the slight bump it had had since a skiing accident; the eyes white and green in perfect contrast, untouched by exposed vessels or deep circles in the lid below. Only the hair seems familiar, dark and black and thick, smooth in the

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front and slightly upraised in the back as if hands have been running through it in a nervous gesture.

He has not seen that face in sixty-five years — except on jacket covers, retrospectives and the wedding photograph that hangs above the mantle in the library on the first floor.

For a moment, he can't breathe. The lump in his throat is so thick he can barely swallow. He can only stare — up — at the man he once was.

And it all clicks into place. Even though he doesn't remember, he *knows*.

"I shouldn't have to invite you in," the replica of his younger self says and steps back.

But Reed cannot move. The voice is half a step off — that odd timbre the human voice makes when recorded, when not heard from within and without. The man — the boy — before him is the age of his great-grandchildren, from an age when the body is lithe and beautiful, unmarked and unmarred by time.

A flush warms him. How odd it feels to look at his former perfection, to know that the broad-shouldered, slim-hipped body before him became this bowed, broken and bent thing that can barely stand on its own.

"Please," the boy says.

Reed glances back at the nurse. She is watching with her hands pressed together in unconscious imitation of prayer, her fingertips pushing against her chin. He cannot bear the look of pity and concern on her face. He steps inside and closes the door.

The room brings up no memories in him, although the pungent scent of tobacco makes it feel like home. A large oak desk dominates. Its position beneath the floor-to-ceiling windows makes it the center of the room. Papers are scattered across its surface, next to a dust-covered typewriter. The primary workstation appears to be the couch, where a laptop hums. Small swinging doors lead into another room, and he knows without looking that it houses a small kitchen with an even smaller bedroom beyond.

Artwork and photographs are scattered along the floor as if someone meant to hang them up. His books, plays, and other published works fill the bookshelves, and the bookshelves dominate, running from floor to ceiling. Over and over, his name appears, in Times Roman, Geneva, and

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Palatino; in gold, blue and bright green: J. Reed Brasher. A constant reoccurring image to remind him who he was.

Richard Nanes's *Nocturnes of the Celestial Seas* plays softly in the background, the rhapsodic, richly chorded *Nocturne in C Major* evoking a melancholy in him he hadn't realized he is feeling.

He built all of this and he remembers none of it.

"Did Cielo Rodriguez help design you?" he asks, his back to the boy.

The boy laughs. That sound, at least, is familiar. It is his father's laugh, down to the last ripple. "Cielo Rodriguez merely laid the groundwork. He knows nothing of the project. You hired RoboTechs to make me, and had them work with a designer in Hamburg, and a young woman whose work shook the world of artificial intelligence. Seventeen tries to come up with me."

Seventeen sounds like too few to create the perfection before him. Too easy. He staggers to the couch and sits beside the laptop. He brushes the keyboard, finds the keys molded to the shape of his fingers. He knows he created all of this so that he would be immortalized, so that he would not die at the end of a normal human life span, but somehow, now, it seems vainglorious.

"And Olive?" he whispers.

"She died before the project was finished."

Reed looks up. This — boy — is the only person who does not speak to him in that sing-song voice of tolerance. He answers the questions as if they are normal, as if he has anticipated them.

"You are stealing my memories." The words rush out of Reed in a gust of anger he does not know he has. His mind has controlled his entire life, and now this artificial person — this thing — is taking his mind from him.

"I do not know how a man can steal from himself," the boy says.

Reed looks at the boy, really looks at him. He is Reed and not Reed. The lump on the nose that Olive used to trace with her finger, the scar beneath the lower lip, the hint of acne that bothered him until he was thirty-five, all missing. The boy's knuckles have lines, but his hands do not — not even the tiny wrinkles Reed used to create by arching his fingers backwards as far as they would go.

"You are not me," Reed says.

"No," the boy responds, "but I will be when the transfer is done."

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His dream was prophetic then — or memory perhaps — the bed as a CT or some other kind of scan, leaching his life from him tidbit by tidbit, idea by idea.

Reed's breathing is labored. He understands his own rationale. His mind controls, so move the mind and he will continue to live. He hates this old man's body, hates its lack of mobility, its constant pain, its systematic failures, but it is *his* body, and trapped within it are the indelible imprints of a life well lived. He clenches his fists and holds them in his lap.

"You can't kill me," the boy says. "They'll just reactivate me when you leave."

Reed swallows. His mouth is dry, his tongue pasted to the back of his teeth. Kill the boy? Destroy the machine that holds all of his memories? Surely he didn't expect himself to be as crazy as that?

Still, the anger has nowhere to go. He is an old man whose body shakes when he stands. He licks his lips, wishing for strength in his limbs. "You should never have let me in here," he says.

The boy sits across from him, the body long and easy in a chair that never housed anything so young. "Had to," he says. "There are bugs in the system."

Reed runs his fingers across his balding pate. He does not want to help this usurper self, this idealized version of the person he once was. His mistake was to think that the boy's future would be his future, a thought he cannot even remember having, but knows he had. Still the questing mind, ever his savior and his betrayer, forces the question from his lips: "What sort of bugs?"

The boy reaches back, gathers papers off the messy desk top, and hands them over, like a young student awaiting his teacher's approval. Reed takes them, his own hand curved and shaking, skin wrinkled and spotted and pocked, without a trace of perfection. He knows where the drive has gone now. They were smart to implant that first.

He glances at the pages, then reads, curious to see what his mind has created without him. The words are smooth, the rhythm and style his. He feels the logic of the grammar, recognizes the vocabulary. But the emptiness shocks him. He saw better papers when he taught the occasional writing class.

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The boy leans close and watches Reed. Bugs in the system. Reed sighs. Yes, of course. He would have wanted everything. Continued life and continued success.

But there can be no success with only pretty words. Doesn't the boy understand that? There are no characters, no emotions. The heart Reed was praised for is missing as if it never had been.

He gazes up at the boy and sees not distress in those green eyes, but a curiosity, as if the boy believes Reed can give him the piece of the puzzle that will make him whole.

"I need to study these," Reed says, and stands. His legs wobble beneath him and the boy reaches out, catching Reed as gently as a man would catch a child. The memory returns: Paula, stumbling as she almost reaches him, her baby legs shaking and uncertain. His hand — scratched, scabbed and callused but young — reaches for her to steady her. Not quite what he had in the hall: close, but different.

He has to get out of here. Now. He rolls the papers and staggers forward, more a drunk than a baby, lurching toward the door. He will not go back to the bed. Finally he understands the plastic headboard. This leaching of memory will have to quit. And be reversed. If they can pull the ideas from him, they can put them back.

"Please," the boy says, and there is a desperation in his tone. "Please. If you leave now, you won't come back."

Damn right, Reed almost says, but doesn't. Confusion makes him dizzy. This is his project after all. He understands the logic of it: brain cells die when deprived of oxygen. An information transfer of this magnitude could not occur after death.

But he never guessed how it would feel — or that it would fail.

He stumbles and the boy catches him with a tenderness he does not expect. The toughness from earlier must have been programmed in, a planned response to questions Reed thought he might ask. The boy's hands are cool and smooth, not quite human, but he eases Reed back to the couch as if Reed were more precious than gold.

"Please," the boy says again. "What am I doing wrong?"

That, at least, is right. The questing mind which has never left him. Never left him, yet is replicated in the boy. An idea blossoms, but he ignores it, allowing it to rise to fruition without the help of his conscious

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brain. Instead he touches the boy's cheeks, feels the down of invisible hairs, the jut of the cheekbones, the oddly perfected nose. After a moment, the boy brings his hand up and touches Reed's face, fingers tracing the wrinkles and grooves carved by time. Reed cannot tell the boy what is missing, because it has taken Reed until this moment to realize what is there: the mind is more than the brain, more than chemicals and neural pathways carved in gray matter. Memories live in each cell, branded as deeply as time has branded his skin.

Reed can stop the theft as easily as he started it — and he will. For he can never recreate himself. He was right about seventeen being too few — and he has not time for hundreds. Even then, the mind will not be whole. It will not know, really know, how Olive's skin felt beneath his fingertips or how her voice resonated in his ears. The scent of pipe tobacco will not bring with it the smell of home, and the brush of fingers against the arm will not recall his co-mingled joy and fear at his first child's first steps.

His body holds those memories and his brain is the link, not the repository. Without his body, no trick of science can pull them free.

He lets go of the boy's face, and glances at the laptop. It is not his, even though it is made for him. He eases off the couch and heads for the desk, pulling the heavy, dusty typewriter toward him. His hands shake no longer, and, as he rolls a sheet of paper into the platen, he smiles just a little. For the drive has returned, along a different pathway, inspired not by the passions of someone else's life, but by the passions of his own. Passions no one, not even the perfected figure in front of him, will experience in the same way again. Passions recorded in the books on the wall. His passions, his life, in his words, already transferred from the deepest parts of his being, from the wounds and the scars no doctor has ever seen.

His daughter, the doctors, his nephew, they are all right. It is normal to lose the old. But the loss will not be his. It will be theirs. Someday he will follow Olive to a place he has never seen.

He looks at the boy, and now the quizzical expression in the boy's eye pleases him.

"I can't teach you how to put your heart and soul on the page," Reed says, his voice firm. "I've never been able to teach anybody that. But I can show you how it's done."

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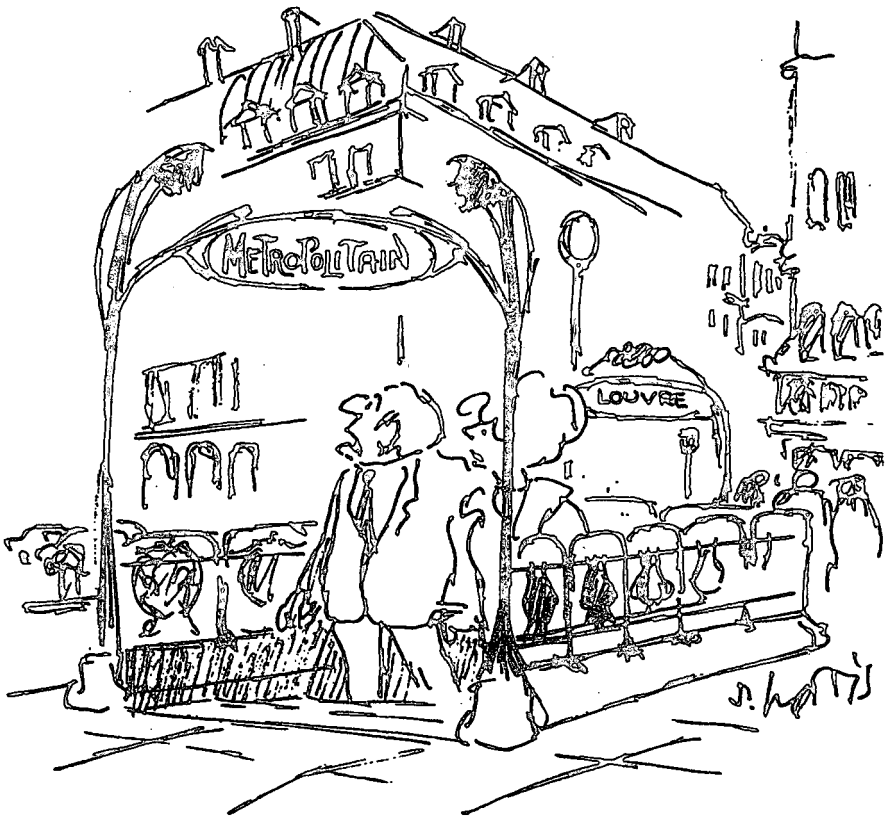
His fingers fit on the dusty keys, but he does not type. The boy can type. Instead Reed tilts his head back and feels the ideas come together. A surge of adrenaline fills him as it always has at the instant of creation. The boy looks over his shoulder, waiting, but Reed does not explain. He does not have to. He has never written to teach.

He writes for the sheer joy of placing himself on the page.

In memory of Kathryn Rusch



"Let's see now...we took the 'EE' train at Times Square, and changed to the 'QB' at Canal Street..."

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Mike Resnick's most recent novel is Kirinyaga, *the long-awaited assemblage of all his stories about the attempt to establish a Kenyan utopia in space. By the time you read this, however, his most recent novel may well be* A Hunger in the Soul, *which is due out shortly. And if you're getting to this issue a bit late—around August, say—his most recent novel is* The Widowmaker Unleashed.

It has been some time since we visited the offices of the Mallory & Carruthers Agency. You'll soon see that the situation there (as usual) is as madcap as ever.

Card Shark

A John Justin Mallory story

By Mike Resnick

WINNIFRED CARRUTHERS, a frown on her pink, pudgy face, placed some cards on a table.

"The March Hare, the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, and the Star," she announced.

Mallory, seated at his desk, his feet balanced atop a ouija board, never looked up from the *Racing Form* that he and the magic mirror behind him were studying intently.

"Does that mean anything to you, John Justin?" she persisted.

"It sounds like the answer to: 'Name a lousy poker hand,'" replied Mallory in a bored voice. He held up the *Form*. "There are more important things to consider: Flyaway's running again tomorrow."

"Hasn't he lost thirty-eight races in a row?" asked Winnifred.

"Forty-one," corrected the magic mirror.

"I'd say he's due to win one, wouldn't you?" replied Mallory.

"I'd go with the string," said the mirror.

"So would I," said Winnifred. "He's remarkably consistent."

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Mallory shrugged. "It's a battle of wills. Someday that nag is going to win, and after betting him thirty-three straight races, I'm not going to be left behind when he does."

"Leaving things behind — like other racehorses — doesn't seem to be his forte," noted Winnifred.

"Oh, ye of little faith," muttered Mallory. "Here I am, trying to figure out if tomorrow is the day he turns it around, and you're nagging me about poker hands."

"Not poker hands," Winnifred corrected him. "Cards."

"Same thing."

"Not quite." She held one of the cards up. "They arrived in the mail, addressed to the Mallory & Carruthers Detective Agency. I think you'll find this one interesting."

"You're not going to leave me alone until I look at it, right?"

"Right, John Justin."

"Okay, toss it over."

Winnifred gave him a withering look and flipped the card toward him with a flick of her wrist. It was halfway across the room when a decidedly feminine figure leaped through the air and grabbed it in her mouth.

"It's only paper," complained the figure, spitting out the card disgustedly.

"Let me guess — you're hungry," said Mallory.

"She's always hungry," said Winnifred.

"Is it my fault that cat people have high metabolisms?" asked the cat person. "Besides, I like to catch things." She purred. "Especially if they wriggle."

"You're all heart, Felina," said Mallory. "Now bring me the damned thing before I lose my patience."

"Doctors lose their patients," said Felina. "What you lose are clients."

"I'm delighted to see that no one will ever accuse you of the twin vices of loyalty and humor," said Mallory. "Now, the card, if you please?"

Felina picked it up and leaped onto the top of Mallory's chair. "Here you are," she said, leaning forward over his head and handing the card to him.

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He studied it for a long moment, then looked at Winnifred. "Is this some kind of joke?" he asked.

"You tell me."

"I have no idea. What the hell is my photograph doing on a card? And how come there's no suit? And is a star higher or lower than an ace?"

"It's a tarot card, John Justin."

He frowned. "Do you believe in that mumbo-jumbo?"

"Certainly."

"Me, too," said Felina and the mirror in unison.

"Rubbish," said Mallory.

"You must remember you're not in *your* Manhattan any more, John Justin," said Winnifred. "In a city with gorgons, leprechauns, unicorns, chimeras, magi, and the Grundy himself, why should you disbelieve in tarot?"

Mallory shrugged. "A man's got to disbelieve in *something*," he said. "It gives his life meaning." He paused and smiled. "I read that in a book I no longer believe in."

"Sometimes I don't understand you at all," said Winnifred.

"My ex-wife had that same problem," replied Mallory wryly.

"*I* understand you," said Felina from somewhere behind his head.

"You do?"

"You're a man. The God Of All Cats put you here to feed me and scratch between my shoulder blades."

"How comforting to know I've been endowed with such a noble purpose."

"Oh, it's not noble," explained Felina. "You can't help yourself."

"So much for free will," said Mallory. He looked at the card again. "Along with wondering who made the card, what made them assume I'm a star? I'm an underpaid detective with a partner and a ninety-two-pound office cat that looks kind of like Melanie Griffith before her morning shave."

"There's a better question than that, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"I'll bet there are dozens of better questions. Which one is yours?"

"*Why* was it sent to us?"

"Beats the hell out of me," answered Mallory. "Maybe it's a sample, and someone will call to see if I want to pay for a whole deck."

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"Maybe," said Winnifred dubiously. "But if it was an advertising solicitation, there should have been some information with it, like who to contact and how much it will cost."

"Maybe it's Hollywood calling, and they finally figured out that I could be a star."

The mirror giggled. Then Felina started chuckling, more and more rapidly, louder and louder, until she finally fell off the chair and rolled across the floor, laughing hysterically.

"All right, all right, so maybe I'm not the next Clint Eastwood. It's not *that* damned funny."

"Sure it is!" gasped Felina.

"I could really get into the part of Tarzan stabbing his knife into Sabor the Lioness's ribcage a couple of dozen times," muttered Mallory bitterly.

"We're getting away from the subject, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"I wasn't aware that there *was* one."

"The tarot card."

"I don't know anything about tarot cards. Do you?"

"No, not really."

"Then let's not worry about it."

"All right," said Winnifred. "But..."

"But what?"

"When I was a white hunter, I didn't know anything about cholera or yellow fever — but I made sure my inoculations were up to date."

"You tell me how to inoculate myself against a tarot card and we'll talk," said Mallory, picking up the *Form* again. "In the meantime, let me concentrate on inoculating Flyaway against a muddy track."

"And anything faster than a turtle," added Felina.

FLYAWAY'S RACE was its usual model of consistency. He broke last in a field of nine, was ninth into the clubhouse turn, ninth down the backstretch, ninth going around the far turn, ninth in the homestretch, and ninth at the wire.

"I go broke betting against Seattle Slew and Swaps and Tim Tam," muttered Mallory, tearing up his tickets. "But I hear a name like Flyaway,

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and I just know this is a *runner*, this is a horse who was meant to pierce a hole in the wind." He stared balefully at the lathered animal as it was led off the track and back to the barn. "When I catch the bastard who named you, there won't be enough of him left to bury."

He decided not to watch the remaining races, since he had no betting interests, and instead took the subway back home. The car he entered was crowded, and he found himself standing next to a pair of sailors. One of them had his eyes shut and a pained expression on his face. The other patted him on the back occasionally, as if to encourage him.

"I don't mean to intrude," said Mallory at last, "but your friend seems to be in some pain."

"No, he's just trying to remember the *Maine*," came the answer. "It's his patriotic nature."

"What happens when he remembers it?" asked Mallory curiously.

"Oh, then he goes to work remembering the *Indianapolis* and the *Bismark*. Of course," added the sailor, "when he remembers the *Bismark*, he hates the British for up to five minutes before returning to his senses. Then he goes back to hating the dirty Viet Cong — or whoever's dirty this time."

Suddenly the first sailor opened his eyes. "Do you suppose Noah had any torpedoes on the ark?"

"Seems unlikely," offered Mallory.

"Okay, thanks," he said, and promptly closed his eyes again, lost in concentration.

"What does he do when he's not remembering sunken warships?" asked Mallory.

"Oh, he kills the enemy, and goes to the movies a lot."

"A nice parley."

"Especially propaganda movies." The sailor pointed to a poster hanging just above them. "That's where we're going tonight."

Mallory looked up. "'A revival of that all-time favorite, *Brazzaville*, starring Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, and Claude Rains,'" he read.

"It's our favorite."

Mallory blinked his eyes. "How can it be? They never made it."

"What are you talking about?" demanded the sailor. "It's probably the most popular film in history."

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"They *wanted* to make a sequel to *Casablanca*, but they never got an acceptable script."

"*Casablanca*?" repeated the sailor. "That piece of shit?"

"It's a great film," insisted Mallory.

"It might have been, if it didn't have Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan in the leads," answered the sailor. "Maybe if they'd used Bogart and Bergman and the rest of the *Brazzaville* cast...."

Mallory grimaced and cursed under his breath. "Damn! Every time I think I'm getting a handle on *this* Manhattan, something always brings home the fact that I'm not in Kansas anymore."

The sailor chuckled. "I like your sense of humor. And I see you know your movies."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That line," continued the sailor. "A delightful inversion of the famed 'We're not in Oz anymore,' from *The Wizard of Kansas*."

"That's me," said Mallory. "A bundle of laughs."

"The *Andrea Dorea!*" cried the first sailor suddenly.

"Doesn't count," said his companion. "Not a war tragedy."

"Damn!" said the first sailor, slamming his fist against the wall of the train — and inadvertently hitting the emergency stop cord.

The train screeched to a halt. The two sailors stumbled into Mallory, who bounced off the wall. Suddenly he looked up and saw that he had jarred the *Brazzaville* poster and frame loose, and that they were falling toward his head. He put up his hands at the last moment, deflecting the frame, and an instant later his head poked up through the poster, right beneath Bogart's hat.

When he related his adventure to Winnifred back at the office, he was prepared for sympathy or even disbelief — but *not* for the reaction he received.

"*Now* do you believe?" she demanded.

"In *Brazzaville*?" he asked, confused.

"In tarot cards."

"Of course not. Why?"

"Because you received a tarot with you as the star, and suddenly you were almost killed by the poster of a star."

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"I'd call that line of reasoning just a bit far-fetched," replied Mallory. "It was a fluke. An accident. No one could have predicted that this guy would hit the emergency cord like that."

"Tarot predicted it."

"Bah, humbug, and rubbish," said Mallory.

"You think so?" said Winnifred. "Then look at *this*." She held up a small pasteboard.

"What is it?"

"A tarot card. Someone slid it under the door while you were at the races."

Mallory walked over, took the card from his gray-haired partner, and examined it.

"That's a picture of me on a gallows with a noose around my neck," he noted.

"The Hanged Man."

"The what?"

"The Hanged Man," repeated Winnifred. "It's a tarot card." She stared at him. "*Now* are you going to start taking all this seriously?"

"It's some kind of prank."

"It's a warning."

"From who? About what?" Mallory tossed the card down onto a table. "Flyaway will win by ten lengths before anyone ever puts a noose around *my* neck."

"I hope you're right, John Justin," said Winnifred dubiously.

"Of course I am," said Mallory, walking to the closet and getting his battered fedora.

"Where are you going now?"

"The Garden."

"I didn't know you'd taken up horticulture, John Justin," said Winnifred with a smile of approval.

"Madison Square Garden," said Mallory.

"A prizefight?" she asked distastefully.

"Basketball game. Gremlins versus the Goblins."

"Be careful."

"Okay, I promise not to foul anyone over seven feet tall," said Mallory, walking out the door.

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* * *

The crowd at the Garden was in a baleful mood. The Gremlins were down 66-37 at the half, which was hardly surprising, since some old-timers swore the Gremlins hadn't won a game since Teddy Roosevelt charged up San Juan Hill. One historian disagreed, claiming that San Juan Hill had marked the halfway point of their current losing streak.

Mean Marvin McCoy was the Gremlins' 108th coach since the streak began, and it looked like he wasn't going to fare any better than his predecessors. Based on the record, it was hardly his fault, but the crowd had to hate *some*one, and since he was human and the team and most of the spectators were gremlins, it wasn't a difficult call.

Let it be said that Mean Marvin wasn't a gracious loser. He spat on his center during a time-out. He put a cigarette out on the back of his point guard's neck. He refused to let his power forward have a drink. When he saw two of his reserves looking too comfortable on the bench, he threw a chair at them. He screamed at the referee, cursed at the public address announcer, and bit a 72-year-old woman on the knee when she cheered after a Goblin basket. He set fire to a child who ran up and asked for an autograph. When one of his players was called for a careless foul, Marvin ripped off his coat, shirt and pants and began stomping on them in mute fury.

Early in the fourth quarter, the crowd began chanting, *"Kill the coach! Kill the coach! Slice him and dice him, tromp him and stomp him! Kill the coach!"*

Mallory decided that he might as well leave, since the Gremlins were losing 133 to 58 with less than seven minutes to play, but as he got to his feet the crowd surged forward toward the court, carrying him along with them.

Mean Marvin took one look at the mass of semi-humanity racing toward him and instantly metamorphized into Meek Marvin, high-tailing it for the locker room. A few spectators ran after him, but most filled the court.

Suddenly a life-sized dummy that looked remarkably like Marvin McCoy appeared.

"Here's what we think of you, Mean Marvin!" cried a gremlin, throwing a rope over the backboard and tying it to the dummy's neck.

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Someone else slipped Marvin's discarded clothes onto the dummy, and set fire to it.

The crowd screamed in ecstacy as Mean Marvin was burnt in effigy. Mallory was jostled this way and that, and suddenly found himself directly beneath the dummy. Just as he looked up at it, the rope holding it burned through, and the blazing dummy began falling toward him. Only the continued jostling saved him, as the dummy hit the court less than a foot away.

Mallory ducked, threw up an arm to protect himself, bumped it against the dummy, and suddenly realized that his sleeve was about to catch fire. He brushed the sparks off his arm, flicking them onto his neighbors in the crowd, most of whom were totally oblivious to them.

As he made his way toward an exit, he overheard one youthful gremlin, armed with an AK-47 and a flame-thrower, laugh and say to his companion, "Hey, this is even more fun than a rock concert!"

"It sure is," came the reply. "I'm bringing my grenades when we play the Gorgons next week!"

"Do your mothers know what you're doing?" demanded an elderly gentleman in outraged tones.

"Sure," replied one of the gremlins. "They're right next door, sticking hatpins into the wrestlers."

"Oh," said the gentleman, taken somewhat aback. "I guess it's okay, then."

Make it a soccer game, and it's not all that different from my *world,* thought Mallory as he walked out the front door and hailed a cab.

"Don't you understand?" demanded Winnifred in exasperation. "You were almost killed by the Hanged Man."

"I was almost set on fire by a rag doll dressed in Marvin McCoy's pants," said Mallory. "There's a difference."

"Damn it, John Justin!" she exploded. "You get a tarot card with your face on the Star, and a framed poster of Humphrey Bogart almost brains you. Then you get a card with yourself as the Hanged Man, and the dummy of a hanging man almost sets you on fire. Don't you see that there's a connection?"

"It was a dummy, not a man," protested Mallory.

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"And it was a poster of a star, not the star itself," said Winnifred. "So what? Two cards, two attempts at murder."

"Oh, come on now," muttered Mallory. "Surely you're not suggesting that entire riot tonight was set up with the express purpose of dropping a burning dummy on me!"

"Tarot doesn't work that way," she replied. "It's mystical. It produced the Hanged Man because someone *knew* this was going to happen. Someone is tinkering with your life, John Justin, and if I can't make you see it, then you're going to be killed and there's not a thing we can do to prevent it."

"What do you propose I do about it?" demanded Mallory. "Buy a crystal ball? Rent a magic wand? Hire the Grundy to protect me?"

She shook her head. "Stop being facetious."

"It's a ridiculous situation."

"It's a *deadly* situation," she corrected him. "I think you should see an expert."

"An expert in murder?"

"Be serious, John Justin. An expert in the mystic sciences."

"Isn't that a contradiction in terms — mystic sciences?"

"Not in *this* Manhattan."

"All right, all right," said Mallory with a defeated sigh. "Who should I see?"

"Well, that's a problem," admitted Winnifred. "By rights, you should see an expert on tarot."

"What's the problem?"

"There *aren't* any experts on tarot in Manhattan. I only recognized those as tarot cards because I saw tarot decks when I was abroad."

"Okay, there aren't any experts. Then what was all the fuss about?"

"There are no *tarot* experts," said Winnifred. "The greatest authority in the mystic sciences is the Queen of Diamonds." She walked to the phone. "I'll make an appointment and tell her it's urgent."

"Tell her it's idiotic."

"The most dangerous things often are," replied Winnifred seriously.

Mallory approached the small storefront with some trepidation. He couldn't help feeling that this was a colossal waste of time, time that could

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be better spent trying to find a horse that was moving up in class and loved the mud.

The sign above the door said it all:

The Queen of Diamonds
Palms Red, Futures Told

Mallory entered the office and instantly heard a hissing sound. He looked down and saw a snake chasing a terrified mongoose around the office.

Sitting at a circular table was a harsh-looking woman with biceps that would have done a prizefighter proud. She had the body of a linebacker, and the pound of makeup and lipstick that she had applied merely emphasized her lack of femininity. Her dress was black, with hundreds of little red hearts on it, and her rouge hadn't quite hidden a heart on each cheek.

A small man in a business suit sat next to her, a notepad in front of him, a quill pen in his hand.

"You ought to give serious consideration to firing your sign painter," said Mallory by way of introduction.

"Why?" asked the Queen of Diamonds, in a voice that matched her physique. At the sound of it both the snake and the mongoose began trembling uncontrollably.

"It says R-E-D."

"So?"

"You want R-E-A-D," continued Mallory.

"Silliest thing I ever heard," said the Queen, holding up her hands, and Mallory could see that the palms were bright red.

"My mistake. You're the Queen of Diamonds?"

"At your service."

"My name is John Justin Mallory. I'm a detective. My partner, Winnifred Carruthers, suggested I see you."

"Winnie? How is the dear old buzzard?"

"Worried."

"Don't tell me," said the Queen of Diamonds, placing a hand on a crystal ball and closing her eyes. "It's a goiter. Definitely benign. Causing momentary distress, but surgery isn't indicated at this moment."

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"Actually, she's worried that someone is trying to kill me," said Mallory.

"Well," replied the Queen with a shrug, "it had to be one or the other."

"She also thought that maybe you could tell me who wants to kill me, and why."

"If anyone can do it, the Queen of Diamonds can," she replied.

"Actually, you look a lot more like the Queen of Hearts to me," noted Mallory.

"Off with his — " began the Queen.

The little man next to her placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Tut-tut," he said.

" — fingernails," she concluded weakly.

"Much better, my dear," he said. The little man turned to Mallory. "She *used* to be the Queen of Hearts," he explained. "I've been hired to change her image."

"Why?"

"She made too many enemies."

"I thought most of them didn't live long enough to do her any damage," said Mallory.

"That was in the old days," said the Queen's publicist. "Last year was the final straw. Electricians Local 708 went on strike because of all the beheadings — they had invested their pension funds in an electric chair manufacturer — and the kingdom was without power for months."

"Off with *all* their — " began the Queen.

"Tut-tut, my dear."

" — mustaches," she finished lamely.

"Look," said Mallory. "Maybe we should just forget the whole thing."

"NONSENSE!" bellowed the Queen as three windows shattered and the mongoose fainted dead away.

"Well, as long as you feel that way about it..." said Mallory.

"Details," said the Queen. "I need details."

"I keep receiving tarot cards with my image on them, and it's remotely possible that someone is trying to kill me in ways that are suggested by the cards."

"Ah," said the Queen with a look of grim satisfaction. "We'll soon get to the bottom of this."

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"What do you know about tarot cards?" asked Mallory.

"Absolutely nothing," she admitted. "But I know almost everything there is to know about murder. Let me see your hand." Mallory stretched his hand out, and the Queen scrutinized it closely. "Yes," she muttered. "Absolutely. No question about it. It's here, and here, and over here too." Finally she looked up. "I find it difficult to believe."

"What are you seeing?" asked Mallory.

She tried to suppress an amused smirk. "You've actually bet on Flyaway thirty-three times in a row!"

"That's all you see?"

"Well, I also see that you don't wash your hands after every meal. I shudder to think of the way your elbows must look."

"What about the tarot cards?"

"I've never seen one. We don't have them in Manhattan."

"Why not?" asked Mallory curiously.

"Because the only possible illustration for the Death card would be the image of the Grundy, and since he demands an exorbitant royalty for the use of it, the manufacturers simply don't distribute their cards in Manhattan."

"Surely they could use a different symbol for Death," said Mallory.

"Name a better one."

Mallory considered the question and finally shrugged. "You have a point." He began to get to his feet. "Thank you for your time. I think I'd better be getting back to the office now."

"I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU YET!" said the Queen at a decibel level that flattened the snake and caused a crack to form on the wall behind her. "SIT!"

Mallory sat back down.

"Take off that ridiculous hat."

Mallory removed the fedora.

"Now lean over."

He leaned across the table, and she began feeling his head with long, incredibly strong fingers.

"Ah!" she said. "This is more like it. This is something I can get my teeth into!"

Mallory flinched at the thought of the Queen's teeth digging into his

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skull, but finally decided that it was merely a figure of speech, since she kept probing his head with her fingers.

"Yes, I see it all clearly now," said the Queen. "The fog is lifting, and what remains is the truth."

"Good," said Mallory. "What do you see?"

"Neil Armstrong will be the first man to set foot on the moon," she intoned as if in a trance. "Seattle Slew will beat Affirmed by three lengths in the Marlboro Cup. Lincoln will free the slaves."

"I guess the only difference between my head and the *World Almanac* is that the *World Almanac* isn't losing its hair," remarked Mallory dryly.

"DON'T INTERRUPT!"

"Sorry," said Mallory meekly.

She kept probing his scalp with her fingers. "Solomon will have seven hundred wives, but he'll have a special spot in his heart for number four hundred ninety-three. Saint Augustine's boasting of his debaucheries will be misinterpreted as contrition. Babe Ruth will call his shot against the Chicago Cubs in the 1932 World Series." She pressed her fingers against his head even harder. "Here it is! Someone's trying to kill you, Mallory!"

"That's *it*?" demanded Mallory. "That's the sum total of everything you've learned from reading my skull and my palm and looking into your crystal ball?"

"Not entirely," she replied defensively. "I also know you have dandruff and that your fingernails are filthy."

"Thanks a heap," said Mallory, getting to his feet again.

"I can tell you one more thing, Mr. Mallory," said the Queen of Diamonds.

He stopped at the door and turned back to her.

"What is it?"

"Something's fishy."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"You said something's fishy."

"Right."

"And I said, what does it mean when you say something's fishy?"

"You want interpretations, go see an oracle," answered the Queen of Diamonds. "I deal in facts. And it's a fact that something's fishy."

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Mallory left even more confused than when he had entered.

"Well, John Justin," said Winnifred when he returned to the office, "how did it go?"

"About as I expected."

"That bad?"

He lit a bent Camel and didn't answer.

"Are you at least convinced that the danger is real?" persisted Winnifred.

"Everyone seems to think so," said Mallory noncommittally. "Well, *almost* everyone. Maybe I ought to go to the source."

"The source of the threats?"

"The source of all magic and all evil, so I can find out if these damned cards are actually predicting what's happening."

"The Grundy?" gasped Winnifred.

"The Grundy."

"But he's the most powerful demon on the East Coast!"

"Outside of you, he's also the only person in this world who's never lied to me."

"Well, I won't have any part of it," said Winnifred. "I'm going out for a walk. I'll be back after he's gone."

She walked out and slammed the door behind her.

Mallory looked around the office, and finally found what he was looking for, lying langorously atop the refrigerator.

"What about you?" he asked.

"I'm not afraid of the Grundy," said Felina.

"It's nice to have *one* loyal friend," said Mallory.

"Oh, I'm not loyal and I'm not really your friend," she corrected him. "I'll desert you in the end. But I'm not afraid of the Grundy."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, John Justin."

"Oh well, we might as well get this show on the road," said Mallory, walking over to the phone. He picked it up and dialed G-R-U-N-D-Y, then waited. But instead of summoning the demon, as it had in the past, the only thing that happened this time was the receiver was filled with maniacal laughter.

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"Maybe he changed his number," muttered Mallory.

"Maybe he doesn't want to talk to you," offered Felina.

"There must be *some* way to attract his attention," said Mallory, looking around the office. Finally his gaze fell upon the morning paper, which, as usual, featured a drawing of the Grundy. (Photographs of him turned out blank.)

Mallory cut out the drawing, taped it to a wall, then took out his personal set of darts from a desk drawer. He withdrew a dart, took careful aim, and hurled it at the demon's left eye.

Suddenly a clawed hand materialized out of thin air, just in time to catch the dart before it reached its target. The hand was attached to a strange being that appeared an instant later. He was tall, a few inches over six feet, with two prominent horns protruding from his hairless head. His eyes were a burning yellow, his nose sharp and aquiline, his teeth white and gleaming, his skin a bright red. His shirt and pants were crushed velvet, his cloak satin, his collar and cuffs made of the fur of some white polar animal. He wore gleaming black gloves and boots, and he had two mystic rubies suspended from his neck on a golden chain. When he exhaled, small clouds of vapor emanated from his mouth and nostrils.

"I *thought* that might bring you here," said Mallory.

"Permit me to say that I have even less admiration for your sense of humor than your ethics," replied the Grundy coldly. "What is it that you want from me, John Justin Mallory?"

"Tell me about tarot cards."

"They are exactly like playing cards, only different."

"You're not being very helpful," noted Mallory.

"It is not my function to be helpful," answered the Grundy.

"Don't explain your function to me again," said Mallory. "I'm in a hurry. Someone is trying to kill me."

"That pleasure is reserved for me."

"Good," said Mallory. "Then *you* stop him."

"I cannot," said the Grundy with honest regret. "My nature forbids me from interfering with acts of violence."

"Then tell me who's trying to kill me and where I can find him, and maybe, as the bride-to-be said to her fiancé, I can save myself for you."

The Grundy shook his head. "I cannot."

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"Against your religion, huh?"

"You think I have free will," said the Grundy, "but in truth, my actions are as constricted as your own. Perhaps even moreso."

"You're saying that you're like a blackjack dealer who wants to hit on 17?" suggested Mallory.

"An infantile analogy, but not without an element of truth."

"Then can you just tell me if these damned tarot cards are influencing events, or if they're just my would-be killer's way of teasing me?"

"Yes."

"Yes, they're influencing events, or yes, they're simply his calling cards?"

"Yes, I can tell you."

Mallory sighed. "But no, you won't?"

"That is correct."

"Is there anything you *can* tell me?"

"There is one thing," said the Grundy.

"What?"

"You had better solve this puzzle quickly, for your opponent is not likely to make too many more mistakes."

"Who *is* my opponent?"

"*That*," said the Grundy, starting to fade from view, "would be telling."

"That's the general idea," said Mallory, but he was talking to an empty space where the demon formerly stood. Suddenly he noticed Felina sniffing the air. "Is he still around?"

"No. He's vanished to wherever he vanishes to," said the cat girl. "And he took your dart with him."

"What were you smelling, then?"

"A visitor," she answered. "A *tasty* visitor." She paused thoughtfully. "A scrumptious visitor." Suddenly she frowned. "A *huge*, tasty, scrumptious visitor."

"Open the door for him," said Mallory.

Felina did as she was told, then backed away, hissing. The visitor entered the office, and Mallory found himself confronting a huge blue-skinned man in a purple sharkskin suit, light blue shirt, violet tie, and navy blue shoes and socks. He stood just under seven feet tall, and weighed in the vicinity of five hundred pounds.

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"What are *you* doing here?" asked Mallory.

"I need a detective," said the Prince of Whales. "You did me a good turn a few months back, and I heard on the grapevine that you could use the business."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Someone's got a hit out on me."

"A nine-million-pounder like you comes to *me* for protection?" asked Mallory. "There's got to be more to it than that."

The Prince of Whales pulled a card out of his pocket and tossed it onto Mallory's desk.

"There have been four attempts on my life already," he said, "and they're always preceded by one of these."

Mallory turned the card face up. It was a tarot card of a shark, with the Prince's face superimposed on it.

"I didn't know tarot cards had sharks."

"They didn't...until now."

"Is that legal?" asked Mallory. "I mean, can you just make up a new tarot card whenever you feel like it?"

"How the hell do I know?" demanded the Prince of Whales. "I just want this nut caught."

"You're the proprietor of the Old Abandoned Warehouse, and the biggest fence in the city," noted Mallory. "Surely you've got a bunch of muscle on your payroll."

"Yeah," acknowledged the Prince. "But they can't *think*." He tapped his massive head with a finger. "I need someone with your brains for this, Mallory. After all, you're the one who broke up that Blue-Nosed Reindeer scam[1] — and you uncovered the plot to fix the elephant races.[2] And the first time we met, you'd found a missing unicorn."[3]

"It's always animals," grumbled Mallory. He glared balefully at the card. "And this time it's a shark."

"So will you take the job?"

"Of course I will. The son of a bitch is after me, too."

"*You*?" repeated the Prince of Whales. "Why?"

"I wish I knew. What does he have against you?"

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[1] "The Blue-Nosed Reindeer"

[2] "Posttime in Pink"

[3] *Stalking the Unicorn*

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"I don't even know who he is," said the Prince. "That's why I came to you."

Just then Winnifred entered the office, a look of concern on her pudgy face and a card in her hand.

"I found this sticking out from under the welcome mat, John Justin," she said. "It's a new one: the Killer Fish."

Mallory took the card from her. It was identical to the Prince of Whales's card, except that this time Mallory's face was the one superimposed over the shark.

"What does it all mean, John Justin?" asked Winnifred.

"It means I'm not going to see the *Racing Form* today," intoned the mirror mournfully.

"All this fish and nothing to eat," sulked Felina.

Mallory stared at the card for another moment, then laid it down on his desk next to the Prince's card.

"Okay," he said. "It's starting to come together."

"It is?" said Winnifred.

"I *knew* I chose the right man for the job!" said the Prince of Whales.

Mallory lit another Camel, and coughed heavily.

"Why do you smoke those things?" asked Winnifred. "You know you hate them."

"Detectives wear trenchcoats and battered fedoras and smoke bent Camels," answered Mallory. He decided to leave out the part about having oversexed secretaries called Velma. "And I'm feeling like a detective right now."

"So who's trying to kill me?" asked the Prince.

"That's what we're about to find out," said Mallory. He handed the two tarot cards across the desk to the Prince of Whales. "And it shouldn't be that hard, because whoever it is wants *me* dead too."

"But who — ?"

"Think," said Mallory. "The first time I met you was two years ago, and we probably didn't spend half a minute in each other's company. The only other time we were together was when I found out you had stolen the Blue-Nosed Reindeer from Nick the Saint."

"Right," agreed the Prince. "But where does that lead us?"

"You're still not thinking," said Mallory. "I had the goods on you. I

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could have sent you away for five years. Instead, I arranged a deal between you and Nick. You each got something you wanted, and you walked away clean."

"So?"

"So whoever's sending the cards obviously has a grudge against both of us — me for setting up the deal, and you for taking it and not going to jail. So it's time to ask yourself: who stood to take over the Old Abandoned Warehouse and the fence business if you'd taken the fall?"

Suddenly the Prince's blue eyes opened wide. "That scheming little bastard!" he yelled.

Mallory shot a triumphant smile at Winnifred, then turned back to the Prince. "Who is it?"

"I have a twin brother," he said. "An evil twin, even by the standards of *our* family. His name's Skippy. He would have taken over."

"Then he's our man." Mallory frowned. "At least, I *think* he is."

"What's wrong?" asked the Prince. "You look troubled."

"Well, if he's your twin, the tarot card should show a whale, not a shark."

"We're identical twins," explained the Prince. "But I'm a lot more identical than Skippy. He's a shark, all right."

"Then all we have to do is send the cops to his place and lock him away."

"It's not that easy," said the Prince of Whales.

"Somehow it never is."

"He's from the West Coast. I don't know where he is, or who he's staying with."

"Then we're going to have to lure him out," said Mallory.

"What kind of bait did you have in mind?" interjected Winnifred.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Mallory. "But if he's a shark, we need something that can attract him." He paused thoughtfully. "Maybe half a ton of whale blubber and a worn-out detective who's seen better days."

"I don't know about this," said the Prince of Whales uncomfortably. "Back when we were just minnows, he always used to kick the shit out of me. Probably he still can."

"Come on," said Mallory. "You're two fullbacks and three defensive tackles all rolled into one, with a couple of jockeys left over."

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"I'm strong, but I'm slow," said the Prince.

"We complement each other perfectly," retorted Mallory. "I'm weak but I'm slow."

"I don't like the feel of this," said the Prince.

"We may not get another opportunity," said Mallory. "Look, I don't know from tarot cards, but somehow they told him we'd be together right now, since we both got the same one. And since they're the Killer Fish, he's not trying to keep his identity a secret anymore. He plans to kill us both together, so now's the best time to set him up."

"Makes sense to me," said the magic mirror.

"It does?" replied Mallory half-seriously. "Then I must have made a mistake somewhere along the way."

"Well, I like that!" said the mirror.

"You liked Screaming Mimi in the 4th at Jamaica last week," said Mallory. "Last I heard, she was still running — and was such a traffic hazard that all the tortoises had to go around her."

"That's it," said the mirror. "I don't have to take any more of this crap! I'm going on strike!"

It went dark, and a moment later began displaying an endless rerun of the 3rd inning of a scoreless 1963 American Association baseball game between El Paso and Tucson. Felina watched in rapt fascination, trying to claw the ball every time it left the pitcher's hand.

"I still don't like the thought of playing bait for Skippy," complained the Prince of Whales. "You've got a magic mirror. Can't *it* do something?"

"Not all dogs are watchdogs," said Mallory. "Not all seven-footers can play basketball. And, especially, not all magic mirrors are worth the powder to blow 'em to hell."

"Well, think of something else, because I'm not going to be bait and wait for Skippy to attack me."

"All right," said Mallory. "There's another way."

"Good."

He walked over to Winnifred and whispered something in her ear, then returned to the Prince.

"What was *that* all about?" asked the Prince suspiciously.

"Just some last-minute instructions in case Skippy shows up here. In the meantime, you're going to move in with me at my apartment, just in

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case he's staking out your digs. Also, this way we can take turns keeping watch."

The Prince of Whales nodded his massive head. "I approve."

Mallory studied him for a long moment. "I've barely got enough food for me. Maybe we'd better pick up some cold cuts and a few gallons of beer on the way home."

He and the Prince walked to the door.

"Good-night, John Justin," said Winnifred.

"See you in the morning," said Mallory.

"If you live that long," said Felina, never taking her orange eyes off the magic mirror.

NOODNIK'S MARKET was just around the corner from Mallory's apartment. If it had a second advantage, Mallory hadn't discovered it in the eighteen months he'd lived in this Manhattan.

He and the Prince of Whales entered the store just after midnight. Seymour Noodnik himself was on duty, and instantly approached the detective.

"How's tricks, Mallory?" he asked, and then lowered his voice to a whisper: "You here on a case?"

"I'm here to pick up some dinner."

"No serial killers? No lewd lady exhibitionists? No — ?"

"Just dinner."

Noodnik shrugged, "Got a specialty on robins' teeth."

"Robins' teeth?"

"Well, they might be sparrows'. But I'll make you a good price."

"What the hell do I want with birds' teeth?" asked Mallory.

"That's not my business," said Noodnik. "I just sell 'em. How about an Upside-Down Nightcrawler?"

"Never heard of it."

"Of course not," said Noodnik. "They're new on the market. You know how your typical nightcrawler has a head at one end and a tail at the other?"

"So?"

Noodnik reached into a shirt pocket and withdrew a large worm,

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holding it up by its tail. "Well, these babies have got their tails on top and their heads down at the other end. Neat, huh?"

"Why would I want a nightcrawler no matter which end the head was on?" asked Mallory.

"Cheap source of protein," answered Noodnik. "And look at the little bastard. Friendly, affable, laughs at your jokes. You could establish a lasting friendship with him — at least until your hunger got the better of you."

"We'll just look around," said Mallory.

"How about minotaur steak!" cried Noodnik. "Flown in fresh from Hialeah. You can still see the jockey's whip marks."

"Some other time."

"You're a hard man to sell, Mallory."

"Don't try to sell me what I don't want."

"But selling you what you *do* want takes all the challenge out of it!" complained Noodnik. "Look, the pants I'm wearing are made of unborn denim. I'll sell 'em to you at cost, and toss in the shirt off my back."

"Later, maybe."

"Mallory, you drive me crazy!"

"I think somebody beat me to it," said Mallory.

A small woman with a bloody ax entered just then, and asked to be shown to the casket department. Noodnik immediately began trying to sell her a meat grinder, and Mallory quickly walked down an empty aisle, followed by the Prince of Whales.

"Is he always like that?" asked the Prince.

"Only when he's awake," said Mallory. "Now let's start looking for something to eat."

They walked past a number of canned items — the store was having a sale on harpy wings and jellied pegasus hooves — and finally wound up by the meat counter.

"Cold cuts, cold cuts..." murmured Mallory, looking into the various glass cases. "This stuff doesn't look so fresh. Maybe we'll buy some fish or lobster instead."

"Sounds fine by me," said the Prince.

They walked a little farther until they came to a huge tank filled with perhaps two hundred lobsters.

"Choose one," suggested Mallory.

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"*That* one," said the Prince of Whales, indicating a large lobster in the middle of the tank.

"Okay," said Mallory. "The butcher doesn't seem to be around, so pull it out yourself."

The Prince of Whales rolled up his sleeve and stuck his hand into the tank — and suddenly froze.

"What's the problem?" asked Mallory. "Pull it out."

"It's pulling back!" gasped the Prince.

"Come on — you're stronger than a lobster."

"I would have agreed with you until about ten seconds ago," grated the Prince, struggling to avoid being pulled into the tank.

"All right, then, let go of it."

"*It* won't let go of *me!*" cried the Prince.

Mallory threw his arms around the Prince's arm — trying to encircle his waist was an impossibility — and pulled.

Suddenly he and the Prince of Whales were falling backward, and standing before them, dripping wet, was a scaly creature, half-man and half-fish, with a huge fin extending from his back. He pulled his bloodless lips back into a nasty grin, revealing a sharp set of oversized teeth.

"*You!*" exclaimed the Prince.

"Yes, me," said Skippy. "I've been waiting for this moment, dreaming of it and planning for it, ever since that day when you robbed me of my rightful inheritance!"

"If you want a fortune, go work for it like your brother did," said Mallory, getting to his feet and brushing off his trenchcoat.

"And *you*," said Skippy, turning to the detective. "You're the reason he didn't go to jail! What kind of scumbucket detective gets the goods on someone and then doesn't turn him over to the cops?"

"The kind who isn't working for the cops in the first place," said Mallory. "I was hired to solve a problem. I solved it."

"And it'll cost you your life, bite by bite!" hissed Skippy.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Mallory calmly. "I was hired to solve you, too."

"What are you talking about."

"I'm talking about the lady with the rifle who's standing fifteen feet behind you."

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"You think I'll fall for that old gag?" demanded Skippy with a contemptuous laugh.

"No, I think you'll fall when I drill you with a couple of shots from this .550 Nitro Express," said Winnifred Carruthers, training the gun on Skippy's head.

Skippy spun around and faced her. "How the hell did you get here?"

"We're detectives, remember?" said Winnifred with a smile.

"We didn't know much about sharks," said Mallory, "but we know they like to hang around in water." He paused. "I'm a creature of habit. This is the only food store I shop at and the only water I'm ever near. I was sure you'd been studying me, so this figured to be where you'd make your move, if not tonight, then tomorrow or the next day. So I had my partner stake it out."

Skippy looked from Winnifred to Mallory. "She's just a fat old woman," he said at last. "What makes you think she can hit a moving target? If she fires that gun, the bullet'll more likely hit you or my brother."

"Skippy, I'm going to do you a favor," said Mallory. "A bigger favor than you deserve." He pulled a coin out of his pocket. "Watch closely now," he said, tossing it into the air.

Winnifred took aim and fired. The coin fell to the floor, a hole in the center of it.

"She's got a black belt in karate, too," said Mallory with a smile. As he spoke, Seymour Noodnik approached them, butcher knife in hand, attracted by the commotion. "Now you serve your time, or Noodnik will be serving you tomorrow morning."

"Is there a problem?" asked Noodnik. "Or is there just another fish to be...processed?"

Skippy quickly assessed the situation and walked over to Winnifred, hands clasped behind his massive head.

"I'm your prisoner," he said. "If you let him touch me, you'll be breaking the law."

"Who would ever know?" asked the Prince of Whales.

"How can you say that to me, your own loving brother?" demanded Skippy.

"You just tried to kill me."

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"That was *business*. This is *family*!"

"No," interjected Noodnik, brandishing his knife. "That was murder. This is business."

Skippy turned to Winnifred. "I appeal to you. Would you want my death on your conscience?"

"*I* would," said a familiar voice as a grinning Felina stepped out from behind another tank, each hand holding a writhing fish.

"I'll just bet you would," said Mallory.

"It'll be the only bet you win all month," purred Felina, biting the head off each fish in turn.

After they turned Skippy over to the police and the Prince of Whales paid them their fee, the two detectives decided to celebrate by going out for a very late dinner. Felina, after promising not to misbehave until sunrise (or at least to try very hard not to), was allowed to accompany them.

The only place open was Ming Toy Epstein's Kosher Chinese Noodle Factory, and the only item still available at that hour was shark's fin soup.

Felina consumed hers with a passion.

"I still don't know why he chose tarot cards," said Winnifred.

"He was a card shark. It's a small step from passing marked cards to using cards as threats."

"But we don't have any tarot cards in Manhattan."

"That's why he used them. This wasn't some psycho who secretly wanted to be caught — and if you don't want to be caught, it makes more sense to taunt your potential victim with something he's never seen before."

"Why did he send four non-tarot cards along with that first one?"

"His notion of misdirection." Mallory smiled. "Sharks aren't the brightest fish in the sea."

Mallory and Winnifred tentatively sipped their soup.

"You know, it's not bad," remarked Mallory, surprised. "Maybe we should have left Skippy to Noodnik's tender mercies."

"It would have saved the city a lot of money," acknowledged Winnifred. "There'll be a trial, and then the expense of keeping him — and he'll probably go free in two years and come right after you again."

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Mallory cracked open his fortune cookie.

"Oh, I doubt it," he said.

"Why?"

He laid the fortune slip down in front of her.

"'*Good fortune is in the cards,*'" she read.

"So much for Death By Card Shark," said Mallory. He stared at the fortune again. "Do you suppose this also means Flyaway has a chance tomorrow?"

Winnifred wondered if a sharp blow to the head might cure her partner's obsession, but decided it would probably just be a waste of good pottery.

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Mary Soon Lee lives in Pittsburgh and works for a small artificial intelligence company. She first introduced us to linguist Janna Suzorsky and the Eridanians "Universal Grammar" (April 1996). Now we return to the same milieu for a lesson in trust and naiveté. (And surely you know by now that last word isn't in the dictionary. Really. Trust me.)

Ex Terra, Ex Astris

By Mary Soon Lee

HOLMAN PUT HIS HAND on my arm just before we entered the U.N. security council meeting. "Janna, remember, be polite."

I shrugged my arm free. "What do you think I'm going to do? Yell at the council?"

The doors opened before Holman could answer, but he shot me a warning look before taking his seat at the oval table. Judging by the ministers' crumpled suits and the jungle of coffee mugs on the table, the security council hadn't had much more sleep than Holman and I. This was the fifth time in forty-eight hours that they had summoned us to testify. And each time they asked the same questions: had we seen evidence of subterfuge or conspiracy in our dealings with the aliens, were there any traps disguised within the Confederate contract?

"Dr. Holman, Dr. Suzorsky," said the Japanese minister, "Thank you for your cooperation. General Dumar asked to review your testimony one final time."

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I could feel my forced smile mutating into a grimace. Most of the council members at least pretended to be considering the merits of the Confederate contract, but Dumar had opposed it from the very start. The contract itself was a straightforward document, offering humans membership in the Confederacy on two conditions: that we guaranteed never to attack other species in the Confederacy, and that we never pursued weapons research tailored against non-Terran species. If we refused to sign, Earth would be flagged as a prohibited world and our contact with other sentients would cease.

Dumar leaned toward me. "Dr. Suzorsky, you were the first linguist to discover the aliens engaged in covert communication. Correct?"

"Yes." Dumar's statement was slanted, but essentially accurate. The first seven alien species to visit Earth arrived speaking human languages flawlessly, but disclosed almost nothing of their own languages or technology. When the seventh set of alien visitors, the Eridanians, arrived, I had deduced some simple word elements from their gestural vocabulary.

"And as soon as the aliens realized you understood them, they ceased this covert communication. Correct?"

I nodded. The Eridanians had promptly switched to speaking Mandarin Chinese to one another.

"Then you agree that the aliens' behavior is suspicious?"

I took a deep breath. "We don't know enough about the Eridanians to understand their reluctance to share their language; perhaps their reasons are cultural or religious — "

"How naive," sneered Dumar. Beside me I heard Holman groan softly, and I knew he was dreading my reaction. Ever since he first hired me, Holman has tried to convince me that diplomacy is an important quality in a xeno-linguist.

Dumar templed his hands on the table in front of him. "Even a child would have more sense. You admit we don't understand the aliens, but you would have us agree to this contract in blind trust, signing away our right to defend ourselves."

I didn't shout. I didn't raise my voice. "How naive," I said, "to believe that our defenses would be in any way adequate if the Confederacy chose to attack. Even a child would have more sense."

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Dumar's face turned beet-red. His teeth ground together audibly, and he said something that can be roughly translated as Ignorant Little Girl.

"And you're a paranoid, megalomaniac fool." For good measure, I repeated myself in French, rather more colorfully.

Dumar stood up to leave. Everyone started to speak at once.

Holman raised one hand, and said quietly, looking at Dumar, "Please, General, sit down. It's late. We're all tired." Holman has the most expressive voice I've ever heard, soft and deep and rich. As he spoke, the rest of the council fell silent. "Tempers are frayed. I know that Janna regrets her rudeness. General, your perspective on this situation is greatly valued. Please don't leave."

And Dumar sat down.

Holman kicked me under the table. Hard. I muttered something that approximated to an apology, and the meeting dragged on until one in the morning.

When the meeting finally ended I left immediately, leaving Holman still talking to the Chinese representative. I caught the shuttle from Brussels to London, then a taxi to my house. As soon as I walked in the front door, Horatio, my house computer, beeped at me. "Good evening, Janna. You have seven messages waiting. Do you wish to hear them?"

"Later."

"Three of the messages are marked as urgent — "

"Are they from Holman?"

"Yes."

"Delete them." I kicked off my shoes and sank into the sofa by the bow window. The last thing I needed was a lecture from Holman. I stared out the window. Outside snow clung to every surface. In the morning the London traffic would turn the snow to brown slush, but for now it was pristine. The rowan tree sagged under the weight, each twig coated to stubby thickness.

I rubbed at the ache in my neck. "Horatio, turn up the heating to seventy degrees."

On the table beside me was a game I'd been given by the Tsiliit, the eighth alien race to visit Earth and the first to share their language. I lifted up the alien game, watching the short rods change color as they touched one another. Unlike the other sentients, the Tsiliit had arrived without

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knowing human languages. For three weeks Holman and I had taught them English as they taught us an alien language. Under the security council's orders, I had studied the recordings of that visit, searching for signs of duplicity. But all I had seen was the Tsiliits' eagerness, their curiosity, and my own face captured in the cube's recording, grinning back at them.

Through the window I watched a large snowflake drift down to land on the sill, and for the first time I regretted my outburst. Not that I hadn't meant every word I'd said to Dumar, but I shouldn't have risked antagonizing the rest of the council. It was less than two years since the Tsiliits' visit, and already human technology had leapt ahead based on the information we'd exchanged. If the U.N. signed the contract, other species might be equally forthcoming. If.

I set the Tsiliit game back down on the table, and fetched the stack of paper-mail, still too wound up to sleep.

I opened the first letter: an ad for a credit card. The second was my bank statement. The third envelope was heavy. I pulled out a square of stiff cardboard, and stopped midway. Someone had glued on a photo of me standing beside the Tsiliit. Overlaid across the edge of the photo, its muzzle against the image of my head, was a cut-out picture of a rifle.

"Horatio." My voice shook. "Horatio, switch on the security system."

I turned over the cardboard. A Humans First pamphlet was taped to the back, proclaiming that the contract was a delaying tactic while the aliens prepared to invade. The department sent out monthly warnings about Isolationist extremists, and I'd seen snippets of the protest marches on the news-cube. But I'd never taken any of it seriously.

I pushed the cardboard away and started opening the rest of my mail. Systematically I unfolded the sheets of paper and stacked them on the table, but I didn't take in a word they said. I thought about calling the police, but it was probably just some teenage kid playing a prank. The department received hate-mail from time to time, and it had never amounted to any more than threatening letters.

Yet the house seemed very empty. Part of me wanted to call Holman. We have our ups and downs, but he'd come over if I explained. He'd be reassuring and considerate...and also smug. I could picture his

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self-satisfied expression, his wide dimpled grin. The grin of someone perfectly ready to offer support but who never needed such support himself. Unbearable.

So I couldn't call Holman, and I didn't want to stay in the house alone. That left Billy's pub. I changed into a black pantsuit, and caught a taxi to Billy's.

It was after three A.M. when I arrived. The poker game was still going, though that was the only sign of life. Billy had abandoned his station behind the bar to join in the game with Lara and Marcos.

Billy waved me over. "Been auditioning for a horror movie, Janna? Or are those bags under your eyes a new fashion?"

"I thought I'd coordinate with your decor," I said. "Rather the worse for wear."

"Don't mind Billy," said Lara. "He's grouchy because he's lost eight hands in a row."

Her blonde ponytail swung sideways as she patted the seat beside her. Lara dresses like a hooker and plays like a card-sharp. I'd stake a year's pay that she knows eight dozen ways to cheat, and another year's pay that she's never used any of them at Billy's.

I took the seat between Lara and Marcos. "What's the game?"

"Jacks to open, nothing wild except red-eyed aliens," said Marcos.

It was nothing, the kind of comment you hear all the time at Billy's, but I thought of the cardboard letter, and I couldn't stop myself from shivering.

"You okay, kiddo?" asked Lara.

"Fine." I picked up my cards, and took a deep breath. As ever the pub smelled of cigarettes, the walls yellowed by years of smoke, familiar, comforting. I pushed a coin forward. "Ten ecus."

BILLY LET ME snatch a few hours sleep in one of the login booths before I went back to work. When I got up, cranky and bleary-eyed, he even offered me a squashed object that might once have been a croissant. I chewed on the maybe-croissant while I sat at the bar, watching the news-cube. The U.N. delegation had announced that they would be meeting the aliens next Thursday.

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The BBC reporters scrupulously refrained from speculation on whether or not the delegation would sign the contract, but they showed clips of world leaders. The German chancellor blustered about independence, and not kowtowing to the aliens. The Egyptian president stressed the need for a larger military budget. Only the Chinese leader publicly advocated signing, but I hoped the others would agree once they were off-camera — if only out of fear that the aliens would otherwise renege on their agreement and blast humanity out of existence.

I refused to think about the alternative, a world turned inward, walled into a solar system that no one else would ever visit.

At ten o'clock I sneaked into my office without being caught by Holman. Before tackling anything else, I emailed an apology to the French general, and a brief note about last night's threatening letter to our security chief.

I skimmed my email, paused when I spotted a message from Lars Svendsen, the man due to captain the fourth ship to Mars. For a moment I forgot all about work and the Confederate contract: when I was growing up I was transfixed by the return to the Moon — the fragile lunar landers, flimsy metal foil envelopes on squat legs; the astronauts swaddled in their bulky suits; Earth rising above the lunar landscape.

Captain Lars Svendsen, astronaut and future Mars colonist. I read his message: he wanted to meet me tomorrow to discuss a possible project if I could fit him in at such short notice. Of course I could. I was busy rearranging my schedule when someone knocked at the door. "Come in."

"Janna." Holman stood in the doorway, one hand clamped rigidly round the handle. "I've just been informed that you received a death threat last night. Why the hell didn't you call me immediately?"

The coldness in his voice told me to abandon the idea of a flippant reply. "I didn't consider it a significant danger."

"Then in the future kindly leave such judgments to someone with more experience."

"Fine. If it happens again, I'll phone the police. Is that satisfactory? Or do you want to escort me home every night?"

The corner of Holman's mouth quirked. "That offer has a certain appeal." He let go of the door handle, the line of his shoulders relaxing.

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"But if you'd prefer another companion, the department will pay for a bodyguard. I don't want you at home alone. Please."

I stared at him: he really was concerned. I hadn't thought about it before, but I was the only person Holman ever treated in this big-brother fashion. With the rest of his department he was friendly but more remote. With the women he dated he was suavely insincere. "I don't need a bodyguard. If you insist, I'll go and stay with a friend for a few days."

"Good."

And he left without even mentioning my run-in with General Dumar.

My English aunt was out of town, and I didn't want to stay with anyone from the department. In the end I went to a hotel. I didn't like the thought of going back to my house, even briefly, so all I had with me was a toothbrush and a backup change of clothes that I kept at the office.

After a shower, I turned on the hotel cube. Lines of men strode down Pall Mall, waving black flags bearing the Isolationist symbol: a silver alien skull with two gaping red eye sockets, one above the other. I switched to the next channel. The same scene, but this time on the streets of Washington DC. A hollow drumbeat sounded, and the men marched in step.

I turned off the cube and got into the bed. I was so tired my joints ached, but it took me a long time to fall asleep, and I dreamed of skulls and blood and the hollow beat of a drum.

THE NEXT MORNING Svendsen arrived at my office a quarter of an hour early. He was a short man in his fifties, with large hands which he waved around energetically as he apologized for being early.

"I'm delighted to meet you." I gestured at a chair. "Sit down. Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes. No." He sat down in the chair, stood up again.

"Dr. Suzorsky, would you mind if we took a walk outside while we chat? I have only been to London twice before, never for long."

"Call me Janna. A walk is fine."

So we went outside into a clear, cold February morning. We walked through Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square. I grew up in the States, and I relish the long layered history of London. Buildings that date back

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to the Middle Ages standing toe-to-toe with glass skyscrapers. We walked past street vendors bundled up in overcoats and scarves. Half of them might have stepped out of Dickens, selling hot roast chestnuts, the smell quite wonderful. But others were selling odd little toys modeled after Tsiliit artifacts.

"What was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

"I want you to invent Martian."

I stared at him. "*Martian*?"

"Yes, we want a common language for Mars, a language of our own."

"Why? Why not English, or Esperanto, or Chinese? Or simply using machine-translation — "

"No, this is not the same. To hear each other's voices, to hear how each word is said, this is better than listening to a translation." His big hands carved up the air as he spoke, emphasizing each point. "Originally we agreed to learn Spanish, but when I suggested a separate language, one not tied to any particular community, a language for Mars, there was much enthusiasm. Will you do this? Will you make us a language?"

I'd dabbled at creating artificial languages when I was a graduate student. Most of the linguists I knew had experimented with their own artificial language, and to be given the chance to design a language that would really be spoken — "I'd love to. I'll have to check with Dr. Holman, but I'm confident he'll approve the project." Holman was always eager to promote the department, and a project like this was bound to attract media attention.

Svendsen beamed. "Excellent. And if it is possible we would like more than the language alone."

"Such as?"

"Everything." He laughed, a round cheery sound. "Well, not everything. But stories and poetry, and school books for children, all in our new language. I thought machine-translation could be used for this."

"It can, though it won't be quite the same. Translations always lose some of the semantics, the flavor of the original." Some of my joy in the morning deflated at the obvious disappointment in his face. "We'll do the best we can. On the plus side, an artificial language will be relatively easy to learn. We can avoid the irregularities of natural languages."

We headed back toward the department. Svendsen clapped me in a

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bear-hug when he said goodbye, and for a second I felt like a little girl being hugged by Father Christmas.

I told Holman about Svendsen's request that afternoon. He agreed immediately, and then leaned back in his chair. "You did stay at a friend's house last night?"

"Yes." It was the simplest answer.

"And you'll stay with them again tonight?"

"Yes, Daddy."

He frowned. "Janna, I'm serious. The Isolationists are determined to prevent the signing of the contract. They're crazy enough to try anything." He paused. "If you need to go back to your house for any reason, I'll arrange for someone to accompany you. I could go there with you after work if you like."

Somehow or another he talked his way into it, and drove me home directly after work.

"Good evening," said Horatio as I opened the door. There was a pile of mail on the doormat. I stepped over the pile, not quite ready to face it.

"You have five messages waiting. I ordered fresh milk — "

"Horatio: off."

Holman picked up the mail as he stepped inside after me. "Would you like me to sort through this while you pack?"

"Thanks."

I ran upstairs, packed my suitcase. When I came back down Holman had arranged the letters into neat stacks.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he said. He pointed at the stacks. "Bills, junk mail, a San Francisco postcard from someone with an illegible signature."

I took the postcard from him. "It's from my sister."

Holman shifted his feet, cleared his throat. "Do you have plans for this evening? We could have a working dinner, and discuss etymologies for artificial languages."

I hesitated. I liked Holman, though I'd probably have denied it if he asked. Once I'd even slept with him, but I'd recovered my wits in the morning: Holman's trail was littered with temporary liaisons and I didn't wish to add to the collection.

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"Just dinner," said Holman. "I promise not to even mention my spare bedroom with the jacuzzi and the view of Hyde Park."

I thought of the empty hotel room. "All right. Just dinner."

Over the following days the threatening letter receded to the back of my mind. I worked late each evening, intent on Martian. My desk piled up with printouts. I talked to Nadia about optimal phoneme sets, to Jeff about machine-translation to convert existing texts to the language we were creating. When Holman had time, he wrote additional software to aid in the language design.

I'd been doing my best to ignore the news, still uneasy whenever I saw pictures of the Isolationists. But when it came to the day that the U.N. delegation was due to meet the Confederate representatives, I couldn't concentrate on work. I kept glancing at the clock. Finally I went to the department lounge to watch the news. The room was already full, everyone crushed in around the news-cube.

Holman arrived a few minutes later, and squashed in beside me. The broadcast showed the U.N. delegates taking their places in the new assembly chamber, their suits dappled with colored light from the huge stained-glass dome above. The four aliens entered and stood motionless as the Chinese leader walked down to meet them, the contract rolled up in his hand.

Bowing his head, he presented the contract to one of the aliens. The circle of the alien's mouth irised open and shut as it unwrapped the contract. On the bottom of the page were the seventeen signatures of the U.N. security council.

Everyone in the department cheered and whooped and hugged the people around them. Holman held onto me a little longer than necessary. "Have I ever mentioned," he hissed into my ear, "that I have a jacuzzi with a view of Hyde Park?"

"Too often," I said, stepping back.

"Does that mean you won't celebrate with me tonight?"

"Not if you were planning on an evening just for two."

"Of course not." He gave me a wide dimpled grin, feigning innocence. "Ptolemy, my cat, is an excellent chaperone."

"Despite that assurance, I think I'll decline."

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That evening I stopped work early for the first time in a week, but I celebrated at Billy's pub rather than Holman's apartment. The next day I checked out of the hotel and moved back home, refusing Holman's offer of a bodyguard.

Earth had a flurry of alien guests in the weeks following the signing of the contract. After a failed bomb attempt by the Isolationists, security for the guests tripled. No one was quite sure how the Confederacy would react if the Isolationists succeeded in injuring one of the aliens. But it seemed possible that they would interpret it as a breach of the contract.

Early in April Svendsen phoned. "The Aki have asked me to meet with them on Wednesday," he said over the phone. "Apparently they are curious about the Mars colony. Would you consider accompanying me? This will be my first meeting with aliens; perhaps I might make some foolish blunder by myself."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, but I'll come if you like."

"The meeting is to be in London. It will be no more than a few hours of your time. So you will come?"

"Yes."

"Excellent."

Wednesday was a cool spring day. The crocuses were open in the parks, the air sweet with blossom. Svendsen wasn't one to waste such fine weather. The pair of Aki agreed to a walk by the Thames, and the four of us set off, surrounded by a phalanx of U.N. soldiers.

The Aki came from a planet with a gravity three-fifths that of Earth. They used walker-skeletons to assist their movements, and the skeletons made a constant low-pitched hum as we walked by the river. Svendsen and the two Aki talked incessantly, one speaking faster than the other. I followed along behind them, content to listen, watching how Svendsen punctuated his sentences with sweeping gestures.

The group paused opposite the Houses of Parliament. The late afternoon sunlight brushed the old buildings to a golden-brown. The U.N. soldiers stood in a protective semicircle backed by a broad wall overlooking the river.

I sat on the wall, and glanced down at the river that gave birth to London over two millennia ago, when the Romans chose it as a suitable

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crossing point of the River Thames in 43 AD. I smiled at the contrast between that image and Svendsen, future Martian colonist, standing here talking to the Aki.

A tiny glowing red dot crept along the stone sidewalk. I blinked, swiveled round to see something sparkle high-up in the Houses of Parliament. Odd. I can't describe it any other way. A mixture of detachment and incongruous elation as I saw the red dot track over the stone, angling toward the nearest Aki. I jumped up, yelling something, pushed the Aki down. I heard the sound of a bone snapping, and that detached part of my mind noted that the Aki exoskeleton is fragile, adapted to a lower gravity. And then there was a sharp heat spreading down from my lower back.

Holman was there when I first woke up. He grinned like a little boy when I opened my eyes. That's the first and best thing that I remember from the next few days. I'd prefer to forget the reporters who squeezed into the hospital ward to snap pictures of my backside cocooned in bioplaster, all the hate-mail from Isolationists, and, almost as bad, the letters of praise from well-meaning strangers. If I'd had more time to consider what I was doing, I would probably have ducked out of the way.

On the fourth day Holman told me that the assassin's body had been found in Geneva, a boy in his teens who'd joined the Isolationists two years ago. His fingerprints matched those on the old-fashioned laser-rifle found earlier. The police declared the case closed with uncharacteristic haste. But one of the U.N. investigators told Holman privately that they suspected alien involvement.

I thought about that a lot as I lay in bed. I had plenty of time to think, and it wasn't a comfortable experience. General Dumar had been correct up to a point. I had been naive, assuming the aliens were trustworthy because that was what I wanted to believe. I thought about Holman, remembering the one night I made love to him, wondering what it would be like to stay together, wondering whether we could ever return to being friends if a relationship didn't work out, and whether it was worth that risk. I thought about Lars Svendsen, and the way I had immediately leapt at the chance to invent a language, without considering whether that was really what he needed.

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I asked Holman to buy me a Latin grammar, and I wrote on the frontispiece, "To Lars, a richer language than I could give you, with stories and speeches and poetry, and a history that won't end as long as someone speaks it. Good luck."

I like to think of the colonists on Mars, reading Virgil and Cicero and Pliny. It's a curious thought, the colonists speaking a long-dead language on a long-dead world as they carve out a new history.

Through my work I have had the chance to speak with alien visitors. But it's people like the colonists who will one day go and seek them out. Yes, alien contact does carry risks, but I think it's better than solitary confinement in our solar system, only able to guess at the universe beyond our doorstep.

They discharged me from hospital at the end of April, and three nights later I took Holman to Billy's pub. It's only so long before you get bored of a jacuzzi and a view of Hyde Park. My bottom was still sore, but life is short. I didn't want to miss out on the poker.

"Lost a fight?" asked Billy, staring at my padded backside.

"And you're looking as ugly as ever too," I told him, gingerly sitting down.

Big Al started dealing. "Stud poker. One-eyed jacks are wild."

With one long red fingernail, Lara flicked up the edge of her hole card just enough to see it. "Shit. I fold."

I breathed in slowly, taking it all in, Holman and Billy, Big Al and Marcos and Chen. Lara dressed to kill. The worn green baize, the smell of cigarettes. As classically perfect as strawberries at Wimbledon. I sighed with contentment.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Next Big Thing

Imaginary Realist: The Life of Timothy Eugene

The Birth of Fabulaic Surmimesis. Written by Milton Sharp, uploaded by HarperOptics, 2025. Download price: E$35.00. Size: 2 meg (xvii 458 pages, plus AV attachments). Download time: approximately two minutes through most ISP's.

THE STORY of *sui generis* author Timothy Eugene and of the strange cult of readers and writers his short life and three novels inspired still continues to fascinate. Although Eugene's work, subject of extensive criticism, has been continuously available since he first leapt into the world's literary consciousness, the author himself has been a figure shrouded in shadows and rumors. Not so any longer. Milton Sharp's superb biography of Eugene—based on five years of groundbreaking research and indefatigable interviews with the few people ever to meet the hermit-author — brings the "Psychopomp of Poultney" out from obscurity for all time. Also featuring Sharp's perceptive exegesis of Eugene's fictions, this volume seems destined to drive Eugene's literary cachet higher than ever. And although much of the factual mystery surrounding Eugene is hereby removed, the end result of this biography is paradoxically to foster a deepening of the aura of inscrutability attending this nonpareil and his novels.

Sharp opens his story in 1985. In this year was born to Eudora and Sinclair Eugene a son they christened Timothy. The elder Eugenes were unlikely candidates to conceive and raise a literary genius. Subsisting on odd jobs and food stamps in Rutland, Vermont, they exhibited no affinity for literature or learning. In this respect, it was a cruel but necessary act of Fate that removed them from Timothy's life, in a car accident when he was only

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five years old and safely at home with a babysitter.

Now the scene switches. Eugene's closest surviving relative was a widowed great-aunt, Frances Hooghly, resident of nearby Poultney, Vermont, and proprietor of a struggling turkey farm. She assumed custodianship of toddler Timothy, and full responsibility for his upbringing. Thus was Eugene's future course determined.

The Hooghly turkey farm was a rural enclave that could have survived from a previous century or millennium. Miles from its nearest neighbor or commercial district, lacking a telephone or electricity, heated by wood and lit by kerosene, a battery-powered radio its only media connection, Eugene's new home — in fact, the only residence he would ever know during his life — was to be instrumental in shaping his peculiar perceptions and mind.

Beset by endless grueling work simply to survive, Frances Hooghly — not unkind or unaffectionate, but supremely practical — quickly determined that little Timothy would have to assume his share of the chores. His education would consist of home-tutoring, as the overlong bus ride to and from the faraway school could not be accommodated.

This prospect accorded well with Eugene's natural bent. The boy proved, from an early age, to be utterly agoraphobic, gripped by a neurosis that only worsened with age. During his teens, for instance, on his worst days, even the usual trip from the security of his bedroom to the turkey sheds would prove impossible. Leashed to the farmhouse and immediate yards by his mental disability, Timothy Eugene lived an isolated life practically unimaginable to the wired and networked citizens of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Luckily for Timothy Eugene and for his future readers, the Hooghly homestead offered one major educational resource — and one further connection with the world. Years before Eugene's birth, in a barter transaction, Frances Hooghly had accepted a small library of old fiction consisting of moldering uniform editions of several Victorian novelists. Lining the farmhouse walls were the complete Dickens, the complete Trollope, the complete Thackery, the complete Balzac (in translation), and several others. These giants of realism were to be Eugene's tutors. He read and re-read them endlessly from approximately age ten until the end of his short life. They inspired him to

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believe that one career choice — other than turkey-raising — remained open to him: author.

At age nineteen, in 2004 when his beloved great-aunt died of untreated pneumonia (contracted while trying to rescue a pair of prize turkeys from drowning), Eugene availed himself of his link to the outside world: a bent-armed antique Underwood typewriter, and the weekly arrival of the RFD postman.

Sharp takes a small detour at this point in his study to survey other famous reclusive artists, illustrating what made Timothy Eugene unique. Giving precise thumbnail sketches of such figures as H. P. Lovecraft, Thomas Pynchon, Robert E. Howard, Marcel Proust, Henry Darger and Joseph Cornell, Sharp illustrates one salient fact about all such creators: no matter how eccentric and sequestered they became in later life, all had fairly normal childhoods marked by extensive immersion in and acclimation to society. Such was not the case with Eugene. Seeing only a few tradesmen as they delivered necessities, never venturing from the farm property, Eugene was a modern "boy raised by wolves" (in this case, "raised by dead authors"). Sharp compares him to the perhaps apocryphal tradition found in some South American tribes: deliberate isolation of a child in a cave from birth, to foster an otherworldly connection that would turn the subject into a shaman.

Timothy Eugene became a modern version of that shaman.

Now bereft of kin, possessing a sharp and active mind, desirous of bettering his lot and expressing himself, young Eugene sat down at the typewriter and composed his first story. Like James Joyce's early, comparatively staid short fiction, it was only partially indicative of what was to come.

"Hope Wears Feathers" (of course a volume of Emily Dickinson lay in the Hooghly cache) was a novella from the point of view of an aspiring and bright thirteen-year-old boy who resided on an isolated turkey farm with a single adult guardian. The farm's daily routines, the rich essence of such an archaic rural life, as well as the boy's dreams and ambitions, were rendered with heartbreaking vividness — as how could they not be? Upon completion, Timothy Eugene sent the piece out to *Green Mountains Review* in Rutland, where it was promptly snapped up.

Against all odds, publication instantly brought Eugene many things: comparisons to Faulkner and

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Steinbeck, fan mail, and a number of solicitations from Manhattan publishers. If he could conceive of a novel, it seemed, he could easily sell it.

But there was the rub. What was Eugene to write about? He had exhausted his stock of firsthand experience with the one novella. At the same time, his worship of the great Victorian realists dictated that he should embark upon a major project of large scope, a vast and intricate tale aiming to encompass truthfully all of modern society and range across all socioeconomic scales.

Eugene knew of the modern world only what he could filter from the few radio programs and occasional fish-smelling newspapers that entered his house. For instance: he knew from observing their passage overhead that airplanes existed; but he had never seen one up close, nor any supporting infrastructure like airports. "Computers" he had heard of, some sort of mechanical brains; but how a person interacted with one was blank to him. Cars he had seen also, but never a "gas station." Likewise, the most common customs and manners and recreations were utterly alien to him; what, for example, was "break-dancing" or "a basketball playoff" or "a press conference" or "a Chief Executive Officer"? And so on and so on, through the catalog of early twenty-first-century existence.

Yet Eugene had held for a long time now — in his active imagination — nascent pictures of these myriad objects and activities. His confidence and enthusiasm led him to believe he had a firmer grasp of things than he actually did. And the more he contemplated life outside the Hooghly turkey farm, the more he convinced himself that he had some real conception of what it entailed.

Here in his narrative, Sharp pauses for a bit of amateur psychoanalysis. Bravely, he tackles the essential question any reader of Timothy Eugene's three astonishing novels must ask: did Eugene really believe he was depicting reality, or was he simply constructing what he knew to be castles in the air, semistandard "fantasy" or "magical realist" novels? After weighing each view, Sharp descends firmly on the side of the first proposal. Maintaining that Eugene worshipped his Victorian role models to such a degree that he could never betray them by "falsifying reality," Sharp insists that the young writer was scrupulous in depicting only what he honestly believed to

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be the "real world." A further proof is the internal consistency among the three books. Once having established a "fact," Eugene never retreated from or contradicted it.

In a burst of creativity, Eugene quickly drafted a proposal for a novel. He accepted the first offer for it (from a perhaps overeager publisher, St. Merton's, who soon came to regret their haste), although he could have held out for more. Ordering a bottle of ink to replenish his obsolete ribbon, along with reams of paper, the Psychopomp of Poultney fell to writing. Thus was born fabulaic surmimesis: the unwavering depiction of a reality inhabited by only a single citizen.

Anyone who has ever stumbled upon *The Casserole of the Linebacker* (2007) without forewarning of its unique nature can surely recall the heady sense of disorientation and cognitive estrangement the book engenders. Here is a tale that plainly fancies itself to be the apex of realism, yet which depicts a world as strange as, say, Peake's *Gormenghast* (1950) or Ishmael Reed's *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967). Yet nowhere is there a lick of irony or deliberate straining for effect.

The main thread concerns the story of Lyle Rosebower, restaurateur and professional athlete for the Chicago Cowslips, his wife, Becky, a Greyhound Bus Lines stewardess, and their quest for happiness in the face of the machinations of the villainous radio-talkshow host, Sternman Partch. Secondary characters number in the dozens, and the subplots are manifold, as with Dickens. Particularly engrossing is the plight of young Goodly Ament, a teenage cheerleader who falls under the sway of a traveling Satanist preacher and clove-cigarette smuggler, Lance Allson.

On the simple level of storytelling, Eugene proved that he had a decent grasp of cause and effect, and of such common emotions as love, hate, and avarice, much like any other competent writer. But in the staging of action and in the details of "everyday" life provided, such an abundance of oddness exists as to render the novel utterly otherworldly. Even those aspects of reality that Eugene intuited almost correctly are off by a disturbing hair. Just the costumes of the characters — Lyle's ruffled collars and velvet jodphurs when hosting at his dining establishment and his spike-topped playing helmet; Becky's harem pants and Partch's swallowtail coat — are enough to

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conjure a scene out of, say, Jack Vance. Add to this, elaborate word-pictures of the absurdly designed appliances and vehicles, buildings and possessions populating Eugene's world, and the final effect is one of opening a window onto a universe that is simultaneously ours and not ours. Yet it must be stressed that not one event incompatible with scientific fact or the tenets of realism is ever introduced.

The reaction to Eugene's first book ranged from utter bewilderment and castigation to indifference to enthusiastic adoption by the avant-garde, who viewed Eugene with complete misunderstanding as a fellow literary transgressor. St. Merton's — who had almost asked for their advance back when they received the manuscript — quickly decided for bottom-line reasons to drop Eugene.

Undaunted, he began his second book, casting about for a smaller press to print it. *Explosion at the Fireworks Factory* (2011) eventually found a home with Four Wallabys Eight Widows Press. This tale of a small town — seen through the eyes of the Pickwickian Wittold family, whose lives centered around the titular factory — earned Eugene his most famous critical quote, from *The New York Times* critic Mistakeo Kakophany: "Reads like a mix of the worst Robert Coover and the best Doctor Seuss."

Eugene's growing bafflement and hurt at the incomprehension of readers and reviewers was evident in his third and final novel, *Starmaker Machinery* (2020), a *bildungsroman* about a novelist named Muchly Small. (The only music station available on Eugene's receiver was devoted to oldies, and Eugene was particularly fond of Joni Mitchell, another kindred soul.) Despite — or perhaps because of — this new wounding, Eugene produced what many have come to regard as his masterpiece. An aging yet perceptive John Crowley, just finishing up his own quartet begun with *Aegypt* (1987), lamented that his book had the misfortune to be released in the same year as Eugene's. The critical consensus, however, was much less kind.

At age thirty-five, Eugene paused to reconsider his whole esthetic goal and method. Fancying himself the reincarnation of George Eliot or Wilkie Collins, he instead found himself reviled as that most detestable thing, a "fantasist." Sharp speculates that he must have finally experienced a critical mass of doubts about his self-developed

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weltanschauung. And so he made his fatal mistake. He decided to broaden his intimacy with the world. Purchasing a computer, subscribing to a dozen online newspapers, bringing a surround-sound HDTV monitor and a satellite dish into his newly electrified hovel, Eugene made contact at last with the world around him.

A Good Samaritan postman found Eugene shortly thereafter, empty of life in front of his new audiovideo digital connections. Cause of death was indeterminate. Like one of his feathered charges, Eugene had simply "drowned" in the flood of distasteful information so at odds with his own precious mental constructs.

Sharp wistfully concludes: "We may only hope that the afterlife includes the whimsical unborn world Timothy Eugene believed in, and that even now he rides those famous caterpillar-jointed trolley cars to the crest of his lurid San Francisco, there to gaze upon Eskimotown and a Golden Gate Bridge that connects the city directly to Seattle, where all the coffee shops feature miniature braziers on each table, and the women are all beautiful in their dirndls and wimples." This reviewer concurs with a heartfelt "Amen."

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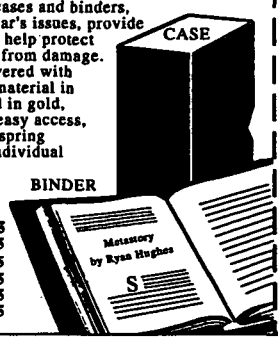

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When he left the CIA many years ago, Robin Wilson underwent a long procedure that allowed him to make public the information that he had once worked in intelligence. He still can't own up to any inspiration he might have provided for Tommy Lee Jones's character in Men in Black, *so don't even ask. However, in his anthologies* Those Who Can *and* Paragons *he has confessed to his role in founding the Clarion workshops some thirty years ago, so we know him to be capable of perpetrating devious acts with long-reaching effects. This new story finds him dealing again with subtle criminal machinations. We've hastened to bring it to you before it ceases to qualify as speculative fiction.*

Thanks, Diaz

By Robin Wilson

THE WORST THING ABOUT the robbery, the biggest one in our little town's history, was that it came when I was just a couple of weeks on the new job, when I knew everyone was still wondering, can the black guy hack it? But it wasn't just me who was on the spot: Robberies of banks with federal charters don't stay local, and this got everyone in the department uptight, eager to get it cleared fast, or at least handed off with real clean site work to the Feds.

The best thing was that nobody got hurt, although Mrs. Symonds, who's the head teller at the Modoc County Federal Savings & Loan on Elvis Street, said she was sure it had cost her a couple of years off her life.

"Scared the livin' shit outta me," she said and then covered her mouth with embarrassment and gave a sidelong glance over my shoulder at where Tani Jefferson, standing just outside the yellow crime scene tape stretched across the tellers' counter, was covering the story for Channel 12.

"Oops," said Mrs. Symonds. "Better watch my tongue, the media here and all."

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We were in the corner of the bank where people wait to talk to one of the bank officers, get a car loan, straighten out some payment hassle. Mrs. Symonds was sitting in the middle of the green Naugahyde couch, fanning herself. I stood in front of her, bending my six and a half feet over so as not to loom too much, which the Chief had warned me about when I shucked the blue and became the department's sole detective. "Looking like a Lakers guard is great, Linc," he had said. "That is, when you're in uniform, breaking up a Saturday night fight over at the Wet Spot. But working in civvies, questioning people, eliciting information — you gotta be a little less — ah — *imposing*."

It was ten o'clock in the morning when I started in with Mrs. Symonds, the first Thursday of the month. Outside in the warm April sunshine, two uniforms — the entire day watch in our little town — were canvassing the merchants up and down the street. A guy from County Criminalistics was dusting around the tellers' stations and over around the front of the vault, although what he thought he'd find was a mystery to me.

"Don't worry about the reporter, Mrs. Symonds," I said, making a mark in my notebook to let her know I was ready to record her answers. "Just tell me what happened. How many of them were there?"

"There was two of them, detective," she said. "Is 'detective' right? Or should it be officer?"

"'Detective' is fine. Or Mundy. Or jeeze, Mrs. Symonds, you've known me since I was a little kid. How about Linc?"

When I was old enough to be aware of adults outside my own household, and they of me, I'm sure Mrs. Symonds had known me as that little colored kid down the street. In our part of northern California, Negro and colored didn't become "black" until I was a school kid, back in the late '70s. Now, four months into the new century, African-American still hadn't made the local lingo, which was okay with me.

"There was two of 'em," said Mrs. Symonds again. "The one guy, he came in the bank and waved that big old gun around. Some kind of black thing with a big curved whatchamacallit sticking out of the bottom..."

"Magazine," I said.

"Yeah. Whatever. He's the one scared the — uh — you know outta me. Scared Milli pretty good too, both of us layin' on the floor in front of the

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counter with our eyes closed like he told us. Milli cried some, she was so scared."

"Okay, then what happened."

"Well, I peeked. I could see the other one, the one out in that blue van that was across the street? Headed toward Kenton? It had those smoky windows but I could still see this man kinda bent over on the driver's side, calm as you please, just gunnin' the motor a little. Vroom! Vroom! Over and over again, regular as clockwork."

"And?" I had learned patience after nearly eight years in harness, but Mrs. Symonds was pushing the envelope on it. Which was amusing Tani Jefferson, who quit sighting through her hand-held and gave me a crooked grin, a raised eyebrow on a face as brown and beautiful as my craziest teenage dream.

"And," said Mrs. Symonds, "the fellow inside musta known we got the armored truck delivery that time on most Thursdays, 'cause he knew just where the bags were in front of the vault, waitin' for us to inventory, put 'em away. Musta known that was the morning Mr. Cleary would be at that Kiwanis thing. Musta known that was the morning Mr. Hapwell had to take his kid to the orthodontist, which is costing him a bundle, let me tell you, and on his salary..."

"And?" My impatience showed this time. "Come on, Mrs. Symonds, what happened."

"Well, I'm tryin' to tell you. This little guy could hardly carry two of them bags at a time, which believe you me they are very heavy. Took him three trips out the front door to that van, carrying all that. People walking by and all, but nobody paid him any attention. Three trips with me and Milli scared to death on the floor, and then they was gone."

"Can you estimate the take?"

"Got the receipt here from Loomis. It was all bills, our big makeup after the first of the month check cashing, the plant bein' on three shifts and all. Boy, we been busy last couple of days. Not like it used to be before everybody went to using plastic, but still..."

"How much does it say," I said, reaching for the receipt.

"It was a bunch," Mrs. Symonds said, hanging on to the receipt. "$993,320 to be exact, mostly in twenties and hundreds. That's what people want nowadays."

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* * *

Of course, mostly all we did was the crime scene stuff, and the Feds moved right in. And to give the arrogant bastards credit, it only took them about a week to break it, or at least most of it. We had a pretty clear picture on the bank's surveillance camera which we circulated around the area, got a hit from a woman in personnel out at the plant who recognized one Edward Ellsworth Gaffney from when he had worked as some kind of computer geek in payroll out there. So the Feds put out a wanted on the NCIC, and some smart beat cop turned up Gaffney where he'd gone to ground in San Francisco. No sign of the million bucks, however.

"One down, one to go," I said to the Chief the morning I got back from Treasure Island, where I'd taken delivery of Gaffney from the SFPD. We would hold him for a local lineup and then ship him off to the county slammer to await trial. I was feeling kind of good, even though it had been the bank's camera, the FBI's National Criminal Intelligence Network, and the sharp-eyed woman out at the plant along with the patrolman in Frisco that'd solved the crime, made the collar.

"Ah, the Feebs'll have the other guy in no time," said the Chief, nodding his head and sticking out his lower lip the way experienced people do when they are by-God sure. "They got Gaffney solid, two eyewitnesses, both made positives. Prosecutor'll cut him a deal if he'll plead and roll on his buddy. First offense, he'll maybe do half of a seven-to-ten."

Which is just what happened. I sat in on the interrogation after the lineup, and it didn't take much to get Gaffney to give up the name of the guy he said had masterminded the whole thing. He had met this Fernando Luis Diaz in a bar two nights before the robbery and they'd gotten drunk together. When Diaz had proposed the robbery, Gaffney had gone along with it.

"It was a dumb thing to do," Gaffney said. "Real dumb. It was kind of a crappy time for me. I was ready for anything. I didn't give a shit." He shook his head, sitting at one end of the table in our little cage, a pale, overweight young guy with long greasy brown hair, something kind of doughy about him. "I hope you guys find Diaz and hang him higher'n a fuckin' kite," he said. And then his anger turned to a whine. "Now I'm gonna do time for goddamn nothin', and it was that Diaz talked me into doing all the heavy lifting, and then he never showed up the next morning

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at the parking lot out back of the 7-Eleven, where we was supposed to make the split."

So the prosecutor cut his deal and they shipped Gaffney off on the fast road to San Quentin. The Feds had Diaz' name and the make and model of the van he had rented, and when it turned up on the recovered vehicle list, they had that too, wiped clean of useful prints but still containing eleven empty canvas bags marked "LOOMIS ARMORED DELIVERY." And of course then they had the Avis lease agreement with Diaz' California driver's license number.

And that got them a ton of information on Diaz. They had his Social Security number, the physical description on his driver's license (SEX: M HAIR: BLK EYES: BR HT: 5-'07 WT: 155), his last known address, where he banked and when he had made his last deposits and withdrawals, and his Visa card account. They knew when and where he'd been born (Alta, Louisiana, November 4th, 1979), when and whom he had married (Bernadette Rae Jacks, 3/15/98) and when she divorced him (2/27/00). They knew his shoe size (from a Visa charge) and the fact that he was nearsighted (+1 diopter in each eye), from the records at Lenscrafters. It is an information age and the more they dug here and there, the more they turned up. Diaz had apparently had a pretty active Internet account through one of the national providers, and he'd ordered stuff on the Visa account and signed up on a bunch of those upgrade notification lists and joined a couple of porno clubs, and all that's like throwing a rock in a big pond: The ripples go on and on.

They had all that, but after three months of the Feds searching nationwide, and our little department — for which read me — checking out every local possibility, nobody could find Diaz. None of the people I talked to who lived anywhere near the last address we had for him admitted ever knowing the guy, and every other lead turned up cold.

It was like he had dropped off the face of the earth, taking the million dollars with him.

In the meantime, Gaffney had done his part of the deal, and even if it hadn't led us to Diaz and the loot right away, the judge gave him a fairly gentle three to five. And in a way, it satisfied everyone. Someone was doing time for the crime and without the expense of a jury trial; the FBI had got their man, or at least one of them; our dinky little police

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department looked pretty professional, which pleased the Chief and the mayor, and the Federal Banks Insurance Corporation ate the million dollars, which didn't particularly set the local citizens' teeth on edge. And who knew? Diaz might show up anytime, although without any kind of a photograph or even an eyewitness to what he looked like — Mrs. Symonds's description of who she saw in the van would have just as well fit the Chief or ex-president Clinton, practically any guy in town but me — there was no way he'd show up on post office walls or appear on America's Most Wanted. A million bucks and no casualties probably wasn't enough to qualify him for show business anyway.

But I wasn't satisfied, probably because I was so new at the business. I couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't quite right about the robbery. Then one Sunday afternoon, maybe six months after Gaffney took up residence at the Big Q, Tanisha and I had been talking trash and making leisurely love when she rolled a little away from me on the new four-poster we'd gotten when we moved in together and asked me that toughest of all lovers' questions. "What's eatin' at you, Linc baby? I don't think you are all the way with me this afternoon."

"You complainin'?"

"Aw no, sugar. It's just that it seem like you be somewhere else, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Now understand. Tani's got a degree from Berkeley in journalism, I've got one from Sac State in criminal justice, and everywhere outside the bedroom and when we're, you know, fighting over something or getting it on together, or making some kind of serious decision, we speak pretty much white. It's second nature for us. Only sometimes, like this, when it's first nature, our words come out black. I guess it's what they used to call Ebonics there for a while, although it's just the way some people grow up talking, the way they talk when they're not on duty, not on stage, not mindful of who they are supposed to be rather than who they way down deep inside really are. A question of identity, I guess.

"I bet both the Queen of England and the Pope have one time or another said, 'shit,'" is the way Tani put it to me once when we were laughing about what we called our "indahouse" language.

"What do you suppose that is in Polish?"

"I don't know."

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Anyway, this time, I said, "I can't put that bank robbery we had outta my mind, can't let go of it."

"Maybe that's just 'cause you so new at the detective business. That was your first real case."

"Maybe," I said. "But I can't see how that Diaz just sorta evaporated, like some kinda bad dream. I don't mean got away. I can see how he might be hiding out somewhere, maybe down in Louisiana where he was born. But it's like he never existed in the first place. We haven't got any physical evidence — no prints, no pictures, no hair or nail clippings or pieces of fabric. Nothing. And so far the Feds haven't even turned up anybody remembers ever knowin' the guy."

"Hey," said Tani, stretching herself out catlike beside me, her voice now again languorous, truly *her*, "maybe he the little man tha' wasn't there. But you the big man tha' *was* there, or at leas' you was jus' a while ago. Any chance you gonna be again soon?"

I THINK IT WAS about then that I began to suspect the truth about the Modoc County Federal Savings & Loan robbery, but for a long time it was too implausible to tell anybody about and I was still too full of doubt about myself to risk voicing any wild theories. And then time went on and the case slipped back into one of those closed filing cabinets everybody has in the back of their mind. Closed, not locked.

Tani and I got married, adding one more to the fifty or so black families still floating a little uncertainly in our white county. I got promoted to lieutenant and spent more time with paper and less with perps. Tani got a new contract as lead anchor with the six o'clock desk even though she was more than six months pregnant and had stopped doing standups. The town got a new mayor, who was a pretty good woman, and life sailed along as smoothly as life ever does.

And then, after thirty-three months, Gaffney was released on good time and reported in as he was ordered to by the county parole officer. I took the interview in our little cage, where I'd last seen him during his initial interrogation. This time, Gaffney sat there fit and cheerful, looking at me across the Formica-topped table with a grin on his face. Prison had cleaned him up considerably, like the dough had been baked.

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"So, Mr. Gaffney, you planning to settle in back here?"

"No, officer. I'm gonna handle a little business I got here, some stuff I left in a friend's basement, and then I'm, like, outta here."

We knew about the stuff in the friend's basement. It had been thoroughly searched and inventoried. "Job lined up somewhere?" I said.

"Yeah. Down in the Bay area."

"Doing what?"

"I had a chance to sharpen up some of my computer skills, there in the Q. Gotta job cuttin' code, little place in Cupertino."

I stared at him a moment, noted the smug expression of the successful con artist, and said to myself, to hell with it.

"Mr. Gaffney," I said. "I have this theory. I think you got an idea from all those computer hackers stealing people's identities, cashing in on their plastic, all that. I gotta hunch there never was any Diaz. I think you had a dummy of some kind there in that van, had something wired onto the accelerator linkage made the engine rev like that. I think you had a whole fake identity for this Diaz built up in people's files, the social security, the banks, VISA, the DMV, all those agencies, and once you got it started, it kinda grew on its own, people puttin' those whatchmacallems, those cookies? Things that let Internet vendors know what you're interested in? Putting them on this phony Diaz's web account, and so the name and all his vitals, they just sort of began to expand all across the country, wherever anybody had certain kinds of computer files, this Diaz identity would eventually show up in them."

Gaffney was looking distinctly uncomfortable but he grunted a laugh. "What a load of shit, Lieutenant. Why'd I wanna do something like that?"

"So's you could have someone to rat out, give up to the prosecutor, cut a deal. Just like you did."

"That's bullshit. What you been smokin', man?"

"Yeah. It may be bullshit and maybe I'm overestimating you, but I don't think so. You're out in thirty-three months, which you divide that into almost a million bucks, makes about thirty-some grand a month salary for doing pretty easy time. And tax-fucking-free."

Gaffney stood up, smiles and smugness gone. "You done with me?"

"Yeah, Gaffney. I'm done with you. But I'll be keeping an eye out and I'm gonna alert your parole officer down there in the Bay area, we hear you

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suddenly spending money, investing a million bucks in something, I'm gonna come looking."

It was an empty threat and Gaffney knew it, and in fact if he did spend some money, I was unaware of it. I never heard anything at all about Gaffney again except once.

It was seven years later — our oldest kid, Richard, was in second grade, I'd been Chief for a year, and Rome had a new Pope, London a new monarch — when I was noodling around one evening with Richard's little beat-up netbook, which by then, of course, every school kid in the country was carrying. Even though they were new and a little crude then, it was a nifty little thing, whole lot lighter than the ragged old books I carried in grade school, and the kids could reach anything in the world the netnanny'd allow, which was pretty much anything that wouldn't make your old maiden aunt blush.

Anyway, both kids were tucked in for the night and I was just surfin' around, waiting for Tani to get home from her evening broadcast, and just for the hell of it, I dug out some old notes and punched in FIND: DIAZ, FERNANDO LUIS, and added his Social Security number. In retrospect, I realize I wasn't just idly horsing around, that the mystery surrounding the Gaffney-Diaz robbery still rankled. Maybe Tani had been right, what she'd said those years before. Maybe it was because it was my first case as a detective: I'd gone from being submerged in my blackness to being nameless in my blues. Then I had a shot at being someone a little different and I couldn't bear the threat of failing at it.

I tapped the ENTER key and I got a hit right away. The little five-inch bubble-gas screen lit up with one short sentence in 24 point bold.

WHOEVER YOU ARE:
DON'T FUCK WITH DIAZ.
— DIAZ

I thought, oh my God, that Gaffney's still playing around with this phony creature he built, still playing mind-games.

And so I punched in FIND: GAFFNEY, EDWARD ELLSWORTH and *his* SSN.

The screen came back with a bunch of references, mostly newspaper stories and court files from the time of the robbery and his plea and

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sentencing. The most recent entry, however, was a brief excerpt from a three-year-old story in the *Southport Evening Post*, which is I guess an Australian newspaper, on the death of "American expatriate and bon vivant E.E. Gaffney" who had died in a hot tub with two young women, apparently the victim of accidental drowning after too much alcohol or drugs.

So, I thought, that's where the million went.

But if Gaffney had been three years dead, was no longer manipulating the electronic identity of Fernando Luis Diaz, who was? Who or what the hell was Diaz? Was it some kind of joke Gaffney had arranged to continue after his death? I supposed that it was technically possible. But why?

It was more mystery than I wanted. I had a good job, great wife, kids. I no longer needed to solve the first mystery of my detection career. In an antic mood, smiling a little ruefully at my own unsettled psychology, I clicked up the URL for the Diaz note and typed in,

SCREW YOU, DIAZ, AND THE SERVER YOU RODE IN ON.

— LINC MUNDY

I had almost forgotten the matter the next morning when a casual query from my bank led me to a frantic half hour on the telephone and — again — the net, discovering that every electronic trace of Lincoln Eugene Mundy had been wiped from every file I had time to examine: bank account, credit cards, Benevolent and Protective Order of Police, NAACP, and so on.

I was thunderstruck. It was clear that Diaz had taken his revenge.

I called up Tani at home just before she was to leave for the station, and before she could say a word, I told her in one long breathless rush what had happened, ending with, "Everything, Tani, everything's gone! I'm kind of an *un*person!"

There was silence on the line for a moment and then she said, "Who'd you say this was?"

My heart stopped.

And then Tani laughed, that deep-in-the-middle-of-intimacy rumbling, throaty laugh, and said, "It's all right, baby. It's all right."

And then for the first time I truly knew who I was, and to hell with you Diaz.

But thanks, too. ☙

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In her new story collection, Weird Women, Wired Women, *Kit Reed notes that she sold her first* F&SF *story to Anthony Boucher a few years ago. This latest sale (which also appears in the new collection) reminds us that Dolly the cloned sheep wasn't the only breeding story to make headlines last year. Amid all the quadruplets and quintuplets born recently was another story, one that sparked this consideration of generation gaps...and leaps and bounds.*

Mommy Nearest

By Kit Reed

"DON'T HIT MY HAND AWAY!"

"Mo-o-m!" She is tying a fucking ribbon in my hair.

"Tammy, dammit, smile!" In spite of the bonding, Mom's teeth are turning yellow. After all, she's practically ninety which sucks, because I'm only sixteen. But hey, she looks all buff in the string bikini, tan as a Moroccan camel saddle, your aggressive size four, check out the Universal Trainer biceps and gleaming six pack abs. The woman is oiled like a piece of antique furniture, which is what she is, while I bob along the beach in pink like a captive balloon.

Smile? "No way!"

She keeps running at me with the bow ribbon. "Shh, they're watching. Hold still!" Welcome to my mom. Regard the tummy tucks, butt lifts, herbal body wraps, hair weave, botulism shots to chill the wrinkles, laser peels, the woman is a miracle of technology. Older than the Aztec gods and she hits the beach like Baywatch is in its first season and she is the new star. You know those prom corsages you smoosh into books and a hundred years later they're still there but they're all shriveled and flat? Well that's my mom. It is obscene.

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I hiss back at her. "I don't care." I am yet another miracle of technology, about which more when I am feeling stronger. Right now I'm battling the hair ribbon. She keeps coming at me, moving her mouth like you do when you're trying to get a baby to swallow something it doesn't want. "Leave me *alone!*"

She wails, "After everything I've done for you!"

"You mean fucking done *to* me!" These *clothes!* Pink jellies and this fucking ruffled playsuit, way gross, and she is all, it's *slenderizing*, whatever that's supposed to mean. What it means is, I'm supposed to look twelve, which in pink candy stripes, I do. You know, one more magic appliance, like the lipo and implants and collagen. She's all, Accessorize. Like, check out your look — sequined headband, mylar bikini, fat kid.... The woman looks like Barbie on Ultra Slim Fast in the bikini, while I could be Mr. Poppin' Fresh on steroids. Or Mrs. Poppin' Fresh, if there is a Mrs. Poppin' Fresh, one more part of her total look. "I hate these clothes!"

Her Sicilian Sunset mouth begins to tremble. "You look lovely."

"I look fat."

"Pleasingly plump."

"Fat!" I look like an albino watermelon, and she knows it too. I am clawing at the ruffles on my front. The ugly truth is Evelyn locks me in my room a lot, along with my old buddies Mrs. Fields and Ben&Jerry's and SaraLee to keep me fat, like if you don't have a waist you'll never grow up. See, if I do grow up, she has to get old. "I feel like fucking Gretel." I do not have to add that she looks like the witch.

"Shh," she says, because we are going by the Caribe Zanzibar Resort and there is a party going on, you know, audience. She wants them all pointing at us and smiling. *Oh look, young mama, doesn't she dress the little girl nice.* She is hissing, "They'll hear."

I get louder. "This is a sick playsuit. Only a sick mother would make a daughter wear a sick playsuit like this." I thwap the back of her thong bikini; any fool could see she is wearing Shape Shifters taped to her butt.

"Don't use that tone with me, not after..."

"Everything you did." I cut her off at the pass. "Don't start."

She starts anyway. "Doctors, clinics, pain. Everything I went through..." Well, what she went through was...Look, you know. It was in

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all the papers. On TV. M.O.W. "A Mother's Pride." These days geriatric moms are no big deal. Some babe my mother's age just popped triplets, but it was a very big deal at the time. I have the clipping laminated in my bedroom, to keep me straight.

SEVENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD WOMAN BECOMES OLDEST FIRST-TIME MOM

No wonder she's always tired. *Don't bother me Tammy, I'm tired.* Say you're bored and she goes, *Shh Tammy, I'm lying down.* Or she sighs. *Tammy, why don't you go out and play*? By this she does not mean go out and ride around in cars plus I'm maybe too weird for guys to want to ride me around in cars, I mean, nobody else dresses like this. Nobody else's mom is, like, a hundred years old. Kids go "Are you adopted?" When I'm like, "No," they back off fast, like, the light bulb goes on. "*Oh, you're* that *Tammy.*" Like it's creepy, which is what it is. "*Test tube Tammy. Ohhhhh.*" Can you guess what they call me at school? "Turkey Baster Tammy" is another one. Oh right, ironic. The Sexy Sixties name. God, we haven't even had the Sixties in History. Our books don't go back that far.

The newspapers said my mom made a million on the rights to our story, which she did. The papers also said this scary thing. That these old bags had other motives, like, birthing a nurse for The Final Days? Like when they've fallen and their beeper doesn't beep us kids are screwed: *Help, I've fallen, and tag. You're it!*

No way! My mom isn't like that. She's the picture of fucking health!

You bet she is. Look, while we're standing here Evelyn has gone down the bill of complaints in full voice and she is winding up, "I did everything for you, and look!"

Something inside me snaps and I go, "No, you look. And then you can fucking go to hell." I start unbuttoning the playsuit. It's time she found out this is only padding and I'm skinny underneath. If I drop the playsuit the whole world will know which of us is young and sexy here, and which is the rack of chicken bones. But her face crumples up and I don't have the heart.

"Oh, Tammy." I expect her usual, but instead she sighs like she'll never take another breath. "I didn't ask for this."

"Well I sure as hell didn't ask for you!" Like a high school junior needs a mom with orthotics plus Odor Eaters overflowing her beach shoes and Ensure folded up in the Depends Adult Undergarments in her beach bag

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and a secret aluminum walker that she keeps stashed by her bed? I mean, having a baby at her age has gotta be disgusting. Like a thousand-year-old mummy having sex. Right out here in the open I go, "What were you *thinking*?"

"Shh," she says. "They'll hear." We are stalled in front of the Caribe Zanzibar. There are a zillion people on the deck. I am *not* smiling. Instead I hit her where she lives. Not to put too fine a point on it, she had me to stay young. The LaMaze classes must have been a hoot. She says, for the audience, "Oh honey, I *wanted* you!"

I snap, "Yeah, like you want a face lift that sticks."

"Don't!" She pulls down the Raybans so I will see that she is glaring. But it isn't quite the same. Things in her face are fighting with other things so the parts don't match. It is too weird.

I am afraid to ask, *Are you okay*? so I growl fondly, to buck her up. "You think you're so fucking cool." Which Evelyn isn't, you know? Especially not now. I am beginning to itch all over. It's like having one of those things festering underneath a Band-Aid that you're scared to peel it off and take a look at?

But I do. I step back. I study my too-tired go-out-and-play don't-bother-me-I'm-resting mother. Except for the ankle bracelet, which does *not* go with the antique jeweled Judith Leiber cockroach handbag or the retro Rave rocket shoes with the toes cut out, she looks all right to me. I snarl, "Go on, say you wish you'd never had me. Go ahead."

This is phase one of the ritual fight, where we get down and duke it out. Then we can make up and go home and she will buy me things. First I have to get her so pissed that she snarls, "I've failed."

Here's how it's supposed to go. She starts with, "On top of everything, you ruined my figure. *Breast feeding*, it made me flat!" Not! Truth is, you can forget the silicone implants and the Breastalizers glued inside the top of the bikini. My mom will always look like a transsexual in the middle of the change. Then I yell and she goes, "You murdered your father, you ungrateful bitch." Which is not exactly true. He was a hundred when he died but she blames me ("You were too heavy for him"). I personally think it was the shock. Her pooping out a baby at her age. Besides, who says that was my real dad in the test tube anyway? The egg, she got from a surrogate baby ranch. *Darling, I got knocked up.* No wonder he died.

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Evelyn is supposed to be yelling these things and I'm supposed to be snapping off witty rejoinders so we can finish and get home. Instead we're out here in the sand and it isn't happening. "Mom?"

She is just standing there.

I yell, "Are we fighting, or what?"

Moms, I will never understand them. Evelyn starts blinking like a bird that just ran into a power mower. Her mouth is going mwah. Mwah. Mway.

"I wasn't your baby," I tell her, trying to bring her back to planet earth. "I was just your second career."

It is definitely her turn. Her line is, "And I'm doing a damn good job!" Then she's supposed to finish me: "You're acting like a child!"

What in God's name did she expect? It sure as hell wasn't me. Like, she thought she would miraculously be forty, like the other moms in the tenth grade? We have Civil War statues in front of our high school that are younger than her. But she is distracted. I hiss, "This is when you say, *You're acting like a child*...Mom?"

Nothing. No way. Me and Evelyn are in stasis here. In front of the Caribe Zanzibar and I can't get her going, not even with pumped old men watching from the Tiki deck. I give her a little prod. You know, like, when you're in the middle of the last act of a play and the star has lost their place? I go, "And I made your life a living hell, right, Mom? Well, I'll tell you whose life is a living hell."

Then Evelyn whirls with this bizarre little kiss-me mouth that the collagen injections have plumped it up so you can hardly see the witch-wrinkles except where the lipstick bleeds up into the grooves and she spreads her hands like a child. "I know. Oh Mommy, I was bad."

You bet I am scared. "Mom!"

She sounds younger than me. "Mommy says it's against God."

She is definitely getting weird. If we're going to survive here, we need to keep this fight on track. I go into attack mode. "You never had a mother, you were too old."

But instead of hitting me or throwing herself down on the redwood chaise with the black mattress emblazoned with *Caribe Zanzibar* in silver letters and going "I've failed" so we can quit and go home, Evelyn just sort of sinks down on her Shape Shifters(™) there in the sand and pulls her knees up under her chin and pats the sand and keeps patting the sand

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until I give in to something a lot scarier than gravity and sit down next to her. For a long time she doesn't speak. She has gone back inside herself like the witch on the weather house and what comes back out in the next revolution is somebody I don't know. She says, "Mama."

I try not to let her see that I am staring. Her face is sinking into her skull in spite of the lipo and the laser touchups, dermabrasion, chemical peel. Her legs look like naked chicken skin and her knees are jittering. I say, "What's the matter?"

Then my mother scares me shitless. She gives this silly little-girl giggle. "I lost my place."

My belly is bunching up in the horrible playsuit, or I think it is. Truth to tell, I'm a size eight under all this padding, but given the way things are going with my mom in this week before her eighty-ninth birthday, it seems safer to let her dream. I try, "So do you want to have our fight here, or go home or what?"

"Oh," she says. "Mother?"

Should I grab somebody's flip phone and dial 911 or what? "I'm not your mother!"

But she just goes, "Mama, have I been out in the sun too long? I know it's bad for my head. Should we go home now and can I have a lolly after my bath?"

Oh fuck, I think. She is having an attack of Alzheimers. What am I going to do? "Wuow, Mom, you're sorry you ever had me. Remember?" Look, we can't go on like this. We are miles from the car. "Mother-daughter conflict, RIGHT?"

"I know you're scared I'll fall in love and go All the Way with some terrible boy." Her eyes are silvered over, burnt-out lightbulbs in some other continuum. She grabs my hand. "I promise, he won't touch me. I promise I'll be home by ten."

"Whoa," I say, but I am already wondering how I would look in her bikini, in case we keep regressing like this. Is this going to end up with us changing clothes and my mother going home in the ruffles, with me leading her by the hand? I bark, "Shape up! I am definitely not your mother. Evelyn! Do you know who I am?"

"Mama," she says in that girly voice, "I promise not to Do It until I'm married. And we won't have babies until after graduate school."

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My God, I think. We're going through the Seven Ages of Mom. "Graduate school! You're a fucking full professor." Which she is. Retired.

"No, you're right, we should wait until I get tenure."

"Mom, you got the gold watch twenty years ago!"

"Tick," she says. "Tock. There goes the biological clock. Forget about Men with Paws, I'm having menopause!" She folds up and starts to cry.

"Oh, Mom!" I give her a little buck-up poke in the rib. "Hey look, you really showed them. You never had menopause, you had a kid!"

"My tubes are all twisted and dried."

"Baby? Remember?" I wiggle my fingers in front of her face but she won't focus. "Evelyn, you're a phenom! Name in all the papers, right? Natural childbirth, play group. You wrote a book!" I am so worried that I start to sing, "Tammy, Tammy, Tammy my lo-ho-hove."

Evelyn mumbles, "Medical breakthrough or medical mess?" I don't know if her head is back there in *then* or here in *now*. Are we in some odd transitional phase? Should I give into this and wipe her mouth, or smack her face to bring her back to now? She quavers. "Oh yes mother is embarrassed, my poor Mama is soooo mad at me!" Sand is getting in the Maalox circle inside those collagen lips.

"Would you please just quit regressing please? Mom?"

But she is sliding a different way. All of a sudden she turns into her mom. "Pregnant, Evelyn. At your age. It is disgusting."

Then she morphs back into the little girl. "Oh Mama, I made a big mistake!"

If she keeps on this way I'll never get her back. I've got to think fast. I roar: "*You* made a mistake. What about me? You think I wanted a hundred-year-old mom?" I rattle her shoulders, gotta try. I have to get her good and mad or she will sink into the sand here and fucking die. People have drifted over from other beach hotels to watch. "Mom. *Mom.*"

She just goes on in her mother's voice. "A baby, and at your age! You should be ashamed." Then she steps back into Evelyn, all girlish and embarrassed. "Oh Mommy, it was an accident."

"I'm not your mom!" Yes I am getting desperate. I shake her harder. I turn her so she'll see that there is an audience, "You're the fucking mother here, so *chill.*"

Then she blinks a little and comes back to herself. Thank God. "Don't

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you dare use that tone with me," she says. "*Shh, they're watching.* After everything I've done for you."

Right on. I've got her going now. "Damn straight."

Her eyes flash, but only a little bit. She tries to get up, and can't. "They said I was crazy, wanting a baby."

That's more like it. Fine, Mom. Stay mad. "And they were right!" But she isn't moving so I rasp, "Now you're supposed to say you're sorry you had me, right? Right, Mom, right?"

"What? Sorry? Oh no!" Oh my gosh she looks at me and her eyes have cleared but I would swear to you that the middles have started spinning around. Then, it is so sweet and so scary, instead of going into the old I've-failed routine she says, "I went ahead and had you and I'm glad."

And something inside me goes, *squish.* This woman's present is my future and it is huge and terrifying. Mother. Daughter. God.

"Oh, honey." She is fixing to collapse into my arms. If I lose her now, this far from the car, I will never get her home. Adrenaline. We are going to do this on adrenaline. So I hiss, "Stand *up.* Don't faint or they'll think you're old."

That gets her, you bet. "Who, me? Old? I'm not old!"

"Shh. They're watching."

She whips her head around. They are. The clientele of the Caribe Zanzibar plus the Hilton and Fluorescent Gulls. Audience! "Oh," she says like a girl. "Oh. Oh!" She touches her hair.

Bingo. They are watching and she knows. I play her very carefully, like a fish you're scared to land. I bang on my ruffled front as if we have been arguing like normal. "Plus, I hate my fucking clothes!"

"Don't use that tone with me." She is getting mad.

I goad her a little bit more. "Why?"

"Because I said so." Spoken like a true mother. Cool.

"Because you *said* so?" I give her a push. "Like *you're* God?"

"No!" she says, and it does my heart good. She gets to her feet and she will stay on her feet as long as I can keep her fighting with me. "Like I'm the mother, and you're only a little girl!"

Way to go, Mom. "Like hell I am," I yell at her. Relief makes me incoherent. "This outfit sucks and you can go to hell!"

"Okay, missy, I'm warning you." Evelyn grabs my arm. It hurts. I go,

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"Mom!" She is marching now, thump thump in the rocket shoes. Rage is making her loud. The whole beach has come out to see. She throws back her shoulders and shouts, for the audience. "Okay, Missy. Watch out," Louder. Spotlight, music. *I'm ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille.* Applause. Applause! Her wig bobs in the sunlight and striding along like that in the bikini with the Breastalizer inserts and Shape Shifters(™) bobbing every whichway, she is magnificent. "Or I'll unplug you from the Internet. And no dessert!"

I squint at her, to be sure the cure takes. Yup, she's up and running. Fine, I think, but I slip in the needle once more, in case. "Your dessert. You know what you can do with your dessert!"

"Shut up," she hisses because she knows what is coming. "They're watching."

Cool! I give her the finger and lay on one last infusion like rocket fuel. "You can take your dessert and shove it up your ass!"

So we are cool. On the strength of this one fight, we're good for at least a year. When we get home I'll let Evelyn spank me. After that we'll both cry and she'll make me sit on her lap. *My little girl.* Then she'll send me to bed. And I can go down the garage roof with my backpack and hitchhike over to the mall. By this time I've boosted enough cool clothes that I can just segue in and, like, mingle, I look so different that even the cute guys don't know it's me and if I slip up with one of these guys when we're rolling around in his car in the parking lot and I end up pregnant, hey, what'll we do? Evelyn won't even be mad. I'll have it but we'll say she did it and it will get her in all the papers, and hey, what retired professor about to be retired as a mom wouldn't want to start a third career?

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Mark Geston is the author of such novels as Out of the Mouth of the Dragon, The Day Star, The Siege of Wonder, *and most recently* Mirror to the Sky. *His work as an attorney in Idaho and the process of raising a family have diminished his creative output over the years, so it's very nice to see this moody, uncanny, and powerful new tale.*

The Allies

By Mark S. Geston

I WAS TO HAVE BEEN THE Captain of the First Ship, but she was destroyed before completion. I was on my way to the building yard in Kazakstan and watched on my transport's situation boards. The saturation attack squandered formations of surface darts, hypersonic cruisers and sub-orbitals with a profligacy unusual for the enemy. Their weapons were always well shielded and at least one out of any five would have gotten through the Ship's defensive hemisphere with their usual tactical approaches. But eighty-nine weapons were sent against her, each with a standard half megaton charge. Forty-one reached the yard's perimeter; of these, fourteen were neutralized by the perfectly simultaneous detonation of the first twenty-seven.

The effect was devastating, even against such a vast target. The central blast crater was almost a kilometer wide and a hundred meters deep. The surface of the Earth was smelted into green glass for a radius of eight kilometers from it. The relief column from Baku found nothing alive more complex than bacteria when it arrived three days later.

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It had become obvious how greatly they prized our world and everything on it but us by the fifth year of our conflict. Their weapons were normally used with economy and dismaying accuracy so that nothing but humankind and our works were destroyed. Fusion weapons were directed against the great cities, but never where their shock waves would escape built-up areas. That was thought to have been why New York was never bombed, out of concern for the green expanse of Central Park. Surface darts were sent to cut all the bridges, pipelines and cables, and fly down the entrances to the river tunnels. The city was effectively besieged and starved into submission in a month.

In the towns and villages that could not be attacked by fusion devices without harming the surrounding countryside, the enemy's agents would appear in small groups or as lone assassins and patiently liquidate everyone who lived there. The rest of us, on our side of the front, listened on the net and heard the people drop away, one by one, even if there were thousands in the distant valley and the process took months. The carrier waves remained, linking us to the dead, until the enemy removed the solar panels and took the translator stations down from the mountain tops.

Reconnaissance showed the Earth flourishing where we had been driven out and the enemy's rule was absolute. The ruins of cities and towns were swept away, granulated and spread across the open spaces to become topsoil or atmospheric dust. (How we remembered the sunsets of those bitter years!) The roads were torn up, the bridges and dams removed, and our ground reseeded with buffalo grass, redwood and oak. Their desert reclaimed the Suez Canal, and the jungle erased the Panama Canal.

The animals returned. Censuses were easy over the infrared band; they left many of the general survey satellites alone as if they wanted us to see what was happening. There were herds of fallow deer in the Bois de Boulogne four years after Paris was leveled. Such a thing would have been a memory to Philip the Fair.

East Africa was easily conquered; after the pandemics of the decade before the war there was hardly anyone left there but miners anyway. We saw the miracles there too. The weather stabilized and the rains came back to the veldt, but that might have had nothing to do with the enemy. The herds of wildebeest and impala returned with the long grasses. Lions

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and cheetahs and other predators unseen for fifty years reappeared in numbers that suggested they had only been hiding instead of having been on the edge of extinction, as everyone had thought.

Laser spectrometry from the low orbit satellites showed that water from the Rhine was clean enough to drink six years after Germany and France were crushed. The Amazon was even more quickly thronged with white dolphins after the fall of Brazil.

The oceans under their control were similarly cleansed. Moles and jetties were scoured from the rims of harbors. The ships left behind were taken apart at night and reduced to elemental forms we had no way of detecting. The whales returned in profusion and our submarines reported hearing scornful choruses from newly reconstituted pods rolling through the Pillars of Hercules and up the Sunda Strait into the Java Sea.

They built only a few installations and enigmatic structures that might have been garrison towns for themselves. There were never any embassies or responses to our demands for negotiation. The ultimatum that they issued upon their first landing was repeated regularly; it never changed in tone or wording. Throughout the years of conflict, it was the only thing they ever said to us.

We knew by the tenth year we could not beat them, and by the fifteenth the best informed people were privately saying they would win. They would pursue their implacable strategy until there were no more people left, but then the rest of the world would blossom in a way that we had never been rich enough to afford.

Great care was taken to understand what was going on in the occupied territories: how many extinctions were averted, how many rare species suddenly brought back to Edenic plenitude, how many thousands of square kilometers of forest reclaimed, dams removed, highways torn up and the ground resown, cities leveled and the places where all the people had been murdered turned into gardens. What was similarly noticed but much less talked about was how impoverished our remaining lands became. What few animals remained with us either sickened and died or just vanished when we were not looking. Either that, or they were the targets of rage and frustration and were the subject of eradication campaigns. Thus, the pigeons and starlings were erased from New York before its siege and all the squirrels in Boston were killed in one July. After the

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fifteenth year, it seemed like the only animals left were those held captive in zoos or the few anachronistic farms that depended on such things.

"When was the last time I saw a bird?" my father asked me shortly before he died. "Just a crow or a seagull? When? A year? Five? Is that possible?" He was not looking at me, but all around at the sky, as if he had misplaced these creatures on a neglected atmospheric shelf and forgotten them.

The idea of their pastoral glory inhibited our offensive operations. We became reluctant to use the area weapons that had served so well in the opening phases of the war. Castle Romeo and Castle Sierra devices could incinerate five thousand square kilometers with one low air-burst but had an extraordinarily low radiation signature; they had wiped out the first enemy footholds on Madagascar and Mindanao. But nothing like that was used after the tenth year. They had beaten us and brought our inheritance back to life as if in rebuke, and we were hesitant to destroy it again.

Preparations for departure began even before the secret of stellar flight was stolen from an enemy cruiser brought down over Wyoming. Half the world was still left to us then, so there were enough resources to build six immense ships. If everything went perfectly, we would save ten million people; less than one half of one percent of the population before the war began.

But the First Ship was destroyed before she was ready, and the same thing happened to the Fifth Ship at her building yard northwest of Buenos Aires. The Second Ship had embarked two million crew members and passengers and was attacked as it accelerated for takeoff across the Sea of Japan and brought down.

At the loss of the First Ship, I was reassigned as Captain of the last, the Sixth Ship. Since I had been chosen by lottery in the first place, I did not feel cheated. I would still be responsible for eight hundred thousand people. I was also secretly relieved that other Captains would go out ahead of me and test the enemy's defenses and the efficacy of the secret we had stolen from them. There was also, however, the realization that I would command the last ship to leave Earth, and this idea sometimes paralyzed me with tragic imaginings. I was attended by three times the number of psychiatrists and counselors that I had been before my new posting.

The loss of the Third Ship, which was the largest and most heavily

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armed of all, was the most disheartening. It carried four and a third million of the best people that could be found in Southeast Asia and Oceania away from a field masterfully hidden in the jungle near Angor Wat. It attained its parking orbit, swatted aside the enemy's destroyers with unexpected ease and even wiped out one of their nightly supply convoys in a display of firepower that lit up the night sky over central Asia so brightly that minarets in faraway Islamabad cast shadows.

The Third Ship asked if she should stay to fight the war but she was told to flee as planned. Perhaps even that short delay had been enough to let the enemy regroup; it was equally likely that they had not been unprepared at all, and the Third Ship had just been lucky.

Everyone left behind in the night's hemisphere watched its plasma trail blossom around it to cover a quarter of the welkin as the first quantum dimensions were unfolded by its Captain. Immense panels on the Ship's surface moved to harmonize its shape to the singular reality being constructed to accommodate its passage through the void, and this made it glitter in the reflected light of its own nebula.

The enemy was waiting for the Third Ship behind Mars, and the ferocity of their assault was visible even at that distance. So great was the weight of destruction thrust upon her that the cone of a Lunar shadow was traced on the dust of her prior engagements.

But while the Third Ship was dying, the smallest of the fleet, the Fourth Ship carrying only two hundred thousand people from North Africa, abruptly left its building field at Tobruk, accelerated over the Mediterranean west of Malta, and then ascended into a dangerously low, nearly atmospheric orbit. At the moment the attack was initiated against her larger sister, her Captain unfolded the first quantum dimension and brought her up and then out at right angles to the ecliptic, up toward Polaris and away from the plane of the galaxy.

"We have to go," I told my superiors as soon as I realized they might succeed.

I was instructed to wait, that rather than being thrown into disarray, the enemy had only been alerted and they would cover every possible avenue of escape. Unlike any of her sisters, the Sixth Ship was constructed underground, and the enemy would not detect her underneath the vacant prairie lands west of Kearney, Nebraska. We could afford to wait.

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It was impossible, I pleaded. Our own ground penetration radar could detect something as massive as the Ship. And the enemy must eventually notice how the city had grown in the past five years, how ground and air traffic to it had increased so. The miracle was that the city had not already had enemy assassins quietly working their way through its population, let alone received a gratuitous half-megaton.

They relented and the Ship was prepared. A month was needed, during which the grasses died around Kearney. I thought that the clouds of topsoil that the wind lifted up from the barren Earth would hide the Sixth Ship's hiding place. Studies by my people also showed that the static electricity generated by such dust storms would blind the enemy's sensors.

The plains were an autumnal desert by the time we were ready. Bates, a geologist, was in the car with me. The iron-colored city passed on the north side of the perimeter highway. He had been talking about how he was looking forward to leaving and going to sleep for several objective centuries while I was unfolding and folding quantum dimensions as if they were origami. Then he suddenly asked, "Killed the dog yet?"

"Excuse me?" I didn't have one.

He was a reasonably good friend, but still looked embarrassed, as if he had affronted my rank. "You know. Killed the dog. Sold the house or paid up the insurance." He spun his right hand up in the air as if to conjure something out of it. "Uh, done whatever you have to do to clean up your affairs here and leave. Forever."

"Sure." I hadn't heard that one, but I spent most of my time with my training staff and my psychological handlers. Still, it seemed an odd choice of phrase. "Have you?"

His expression changed. "Last week. See? It can be the literal truth. We took her to the vet and had her put down. She was pretty old and it would have happened soon anyway, even without us leaving. The administrative people've taken care of whatever else's to be left behind."

I followed Bates's stare back toward the city. "Jesus. Not that we brought much to this place anyway." I assumed he was marveling at how little we had left to defend by now. I was. Knowledge of what the occupied territories looked like made it so much worse.

I tried to distract him. "But not drown the cat? Or..." I tried to think

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of a kind of pet generally obnoxious enough to warrant strangulation. "Or terminate the parrot?"

"But why should anyone think of doing that?" he responded with genuine interest, as if I had asked something meant to do more than fill up an awkward pause. "There haven't been anything in Kearney but dogs since I got here." He was right. "I thought it was just the way people who came here were. You know? But every other place I've visited lately seems to be the same way. Just a few dogs and nothing else that wasn't already in a cage before the war began." He shook his head, as if this puzzle had defeated him before.

I stupidly kept trying to shake him out of his reverie. "So I envision long columns of refugee cats and escaped zoo animals, trudging through no man's land, toward the green walls of the occupied territories." *Sure. And leaving burning, miniature cat shtetls behind, walking down the muddy road, pushing carts before them, away from the ancient oppressor.*

Bates almost took me seriously. "It might not have been too much different from that, really. Who knows?" He shrugged. "But they are gone. Almost all of them except for the dogs." Then he smiled again, but sadly. "And look at how I reward such loyalty. Putting her down just because there won't be any room for her on the Ship."

"No room for anything but we few hundreds of thousands and what we need for a long quiet flight through the void."

"So we'll just have to find our cats and dogs where we land."

He sounded sensible again. "And our lions and crows and carp."

"Oh my," he responded on cue, but not very brightly.

"I'm sure there'll be a place where all of them will be there to welcome us."

We reached the East Portal and Bates dropped me off at my car. I said goodbye to him then because he was scheduled to board the next day.

Embarkation began then and continued for five days after that. The departure crew then needed another two days to get everyone down and suspended for the trip, after which they tucked themselves away. Everyone was assured there would be no dreams.

I was the last one to leave the city and board because I was to be the only one on the Ship who would be awake during our escape. I briefly

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entertained the notion of going aboveground the day we were to leave. There was an unaccounted hour in the schedule that would have given me enough time to go to the surface and make a farewell gesture — like lowering of a flag or a scotch at the bar on McNearey Street I'd usually gone to when my handlers let me out for an evening.

It was impractical. The city was by then populated by decoy robots radiating human infrared signatures, exhaling the correct mix of respiratory gases, driving our vehicles and inhabiting our homes and offices to simulate our commerce, so the enemy might be deceived for another day. I would only get in their way. I wondered if there were robotic dogs on the surface too, accompanying their aluminum-limbed masters, and if they would treat their electrical companions better than Bates and the rest of us had treated their prototypes.

Dutifully, I rode the lifts down to the building cavern's floor. The Ship was above me, filling the cavern. *This is mine,* I thought, and made myself believe that our voyage's success or failure had already been decided by forces beyond my control. *Eight hundred thousand people, and only one other Ship has gotten away!* Fatalism is indistinguishable from courage when regarded from the outside, and this reassured me when I wondered as I walked the kilometer to the entryway if the enemy, if the robots in the city above me, or the ghosts of the dogs recently killed by their masters were watching. Of course the Ship's Minds themselves were, through her myriad sensors, judging their Captain, wondering if he could be trusted.

I walked up the ramp and the hangar door hissed shut behind me. Then it was quiet, except for the soft, reassuring voice of the Ship's Minds whispering from my bracelet and from each wall and bulkhead I passed, gently scolding me for having cut things so closely. A transport pallet glided up behind me and I allowed it to convey me through the Ship's corridors and lifts to my station. I was told that the sky and the space above America was quiet. The enemy was still picking through the wreckage of the Third Ship or returning from their failed pursuits of the Fourth. The Ship's Minds expressed cautious optimism. *Just to me,* I thought. *Not to any of the others. This is our own secret.*

I got onto my couch and waited, already as alone as I would be in space. *There are only people here, and their creations. No dirt or insects. The*

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dust in their clothing as they came on board has been precisely measured. No plants, bacteria or fungi are here that are not required for agriculture, manufacture or recycling. Certainly no animals. Even if we had room and thought they should come with us, they all turned traitor and fled to the enemy long before now. Except the dogs, and they've either been put down or deserted.

The Minds read my thoughts. "There is no time or space for them. This is the best we can do. We have always wished it would not be so."

"Always?" They were only activated six months ago.

Then we left. I imagined twenty-five square kilometers of the prairie west of Kearney erupting as the Sixth Ship lifted up from its building cavern. There should have been a dust storm overhead, concealing it with lightning. The robots in the city would feign indifference. I wondered how long they would continue to go about their simulated business after we left. The Minds told me they would until the enemy arrived to return Nebraska to grassland and restore the buffalo.

I felt nothing seated at the center of the Ship, acceleration canceled out by her local gravity. Although I was the Captain, our escape was entirely up to the Ship's Minds. Only they were quick and resourceful enough to evade the enemy if we were detected; only they could manage her defensive systems.

My compartment was the only private room in the Ship. It was twenty meters in diameter, and sections of it could be closed off as I wished. I had it all open for the departure and reclined before the bridge console, which held an array of screens reporting the Ship's general situation and what it perceived of the space around it. Contradictorily, the rest of the compartment was intended to distract and soothe me. My psychological handlers had chosen to project holographic images of the palace grounds at Nymphemburg, near Munich, in opposition to the walls; there was a blue sky on the ceiling overhead and my furniture was seemingly placed on the meticulous lawn between the pool and the topiary maze.

The Amalienburg Pavilion was visible through the trees on my left. It was an empty though beautifully rendered architectural study. I had not expected any people strolling across the lawn. Such homunculi could have provoked a number of counterproductive responses and associations, so they were naturally left out. But the programmers had not included any

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animals either; no squirrels or foxes, or even any of the black swans for which the palace had been so famous. The only thing that moved was the water over the artful cataracts and the branches of the oaks and linden trees.

The cyber-dukes and duchesses must have killed their greyhounds and mastiffs before they left.

We left the atmosphere undetected. I could not believe our good fortune. The Ship's local gravity came up to full effect and there was no sense of motion. I carefully put on my armor and cycled the manipulators attached to it. Depending on one's mood, I knew I would look like Shiva or a crab, but the illusion of Nymphemburg overlaid the room's mirrors so I saw nothing to resolve this speculation.

I descended on a lift to where the quantum dimensions were kept imprisoned by a conventional reality. Although the Ship's Minds would plan and execute every step of our escape across the void, it was still up to me to unfold the quantum dimensions and then restore them to their proper condition when we found a world to sustain us. It was a task that had defied the most subtle artificial intelligences during tests. To that moment, only the Fourth Ship seemed to have done it, but she had vanished as intended so there was no way to be sure. We believed the enemy did such things manually too, even though their cybernetics were thought to be much more advanced than ours.

I successfully unfolded the first dimension. The screens on the read-out pedestal to my right instantly reported that the Ship attained the first measurable fraction of the speed of light. Then I had to wait while enormous panels on her exterior reconfigured themselves to a new shape that matched the altered reality I had just constructed. That was good, because my hands were trembling from excitement.

The Ship's Minds signaled for the second dimension to be unfolded and aligned with the first. This was done, although there was a moment when I hesitated and a subjective clock appeared on a large, previously dark screen at the other end of the compartment, informing me that all of us would slip into an incomplete reality if the work was not completed within the stated time.

The Ship changed shape again, this time more drastically. The Minds informed me that there had been an attack but the enemy had not really known where we were and their weapons fell far short.

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After the appointed interval, I opened the third dimension. Now a functioning, divergent reality was in place and the enemy could not touch us. The Ship's subjective position in the universe abruptly changed, and its probabilistic location relative to the Earth comprehended more than an equivalent third of the speed of light.

The process continued over the next three subjective days, by which time the Ship passed by seven solar systems. Then I was finished and left alone while the Minds plotted the passage from one star system to another. I was no more alone than I had been during my training on Earth, and found the situation agreeable.

After a subjective year, however, the Minds recommended that ten percent of the people be awakened. They were troubled by anomalies in their physiological base lines and speculated that the subconsciousness, left undefended by the waking self, acutely sensed the void outside and was being eroded by it. I knew the Ship's designers had planned for such a contingency. Up to half the people on board could be sustained in a waking state by its systems if that was absolutely necessary. Conditions would be abominable, but it could be done.

The clean and vacant corridors of the Ship became packed with bad-smelling and barely coherent people, most of whom seemed as displeased to see their fellows awake as I secretly was. I was impressed, however, with the self-discipline most of them showed. The Minds were probably right and they had vaguely perceived something indescribable lurking outside, which had crept into them and left behind an indelible chill upon awakening. I hoped the others would not be so afflicted.

We encountered more planetary systems as we traveled up the arm of the galaxy, toward the central disk. Against all predictive odds, none were sufficiently like home to offer any refuge. Where there was life, it was utterly foreign to us. Many began asking where, if the universe was so inhospitable, the enemy had come from. Could it be that out of all the stars, there were only our world and theirs, and we were therefore destined to contest the two places?

All the while, the Minds would regularly tell me that another fraction of the passengers and crew would have to be awakened to avoid irreversible damage.

The Ship responded splendidly to this growing burden. The efficien-

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cies of the production and recycling units far exceeded their designers' expectations. We lived, crowded shoulder to shoulder as the Ship's kilometers of galleries and halls filled up with people who had nothing much to talk about and even less to do.

We endured three subjective years like this. Sixty-one planetary systems were investigated and found unsuitable. On one, we detected the remains of an enemy outpost that had been destroyed by earthquake and corrosive gas an objective century before our arrival.

I let a party of a thousand people descend to another after they had nearly threatened mutiny if they were not allowed to leave. It required a subjective week to disassemble the quantum dimensions and descend into the prevalent reality. We lost contact with them during their first night on the ground. Orbital reconnaissance the next day could not find any evidence they had ever been there, and it was only after two objective days of analysis that the Minds and I were able to guess at what had happened, and then, of course, we dared not share it with anyone. I took the Ship away and spent four days reassembling the quantum dimensions so we could resume our travel.

I was therefore not at all surprised when they began asking to go home. I naturally refused at first, but the requests became more insistent as we reconnoitered one uninhabitable star system after another. I sympathized with them and would have consented for I, myself, was losing the desire to go on if I could not be alone again. But I could not because returning would mean failure and extinction.

Only a hundred thousand people remained asleep by this point and the Minds were unanimous that their lives would be threatened as the others' had been if they were not awakened. There was also rioting and belligerence among the waking and the Ship's security systems were having trouble avoiding injuries. I consulted the Minds and shared my indecision with them. They reassuringly told me that it was nothing extraordinary "given the circumstances," but that it did present me with two choices that at least had to be considered. First, I could preserve order and make the Ship habitable for up to eight subjective centuries if I liquidated all but eight thousand people.

"Liquidate?" I wanted to hear them say it plainly, to implicate them in what I had already privately considered.

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"Kill them," the chorused voice whispered from the woods around the Amalienburg pavilion. "They will not let themselves be put back to sleep, and if they are, their lives will only be threatened again within another subjective year."

"All but eight thousand?" Terribly, I found equally repellent the idea that I would still have to share the rest of my subjective life with the eight thousand living if we did not find a world for ourselves.

"Such a measure would assure that the voyage could continue almost indefinitely and still preserve a semblance of genetic diversity once..."

"If," I suggested.

"...if," the Minds unexpectedly agreed, "a suitable place is found. The other choice is to go home as they ask. As we believe you wish to do." I prepared myself for a reprimand. Instead they continued. "We believe that this is all that can be asked of any of you." The Ship wanted to go home too.

There were no real celebrations when I told the people of my decision. Only some messages of thanks delivered through my com-mail or self-consciously spoken to me as I shouldered my way along the teeming galleries. No one, not even the Minds, asked me what we should do when we arrived, probably assuming we would simply be blown to pieces the instant we arrived.

The geometry of the space the Sixth Ship then occupied was such that we were close to Earth. Only two subjective months were needed for the trip back.

I disassembled all but three of the dimensions so we could peer into objective reality from relative safety. The system Sunward of Mars had been aswarm with enemy convoys and there had always been a few of our own missiles hunting in and out of the dust clouds in the years before we left. Everything was quiet now. All the satellites, both theirs and ours, planetary and solar, had been swept away, although considering how long we had been gone, many of them could have been lost to normal orbital decay. It was as if mankind had never left the world and as if the enemy had never thrust themselves across the void to meet us. "How long have we been gone? Truly gone?" I asked the Minds and was shocked by their answer.

"Is anyone left?"

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The Minds' voices were sympathetic. "No. There are no people left, and the enemy is gone too. It is safe."

It would not have made a difference if it had not been. We had ended the voyage and come home. We would land no matter what awaited us.

I awakened the remaining sleepers and told everyone. This time there were some anxious celebrations. Parents retold the old, stale stories to their objectively ancient children, but this time as if they believed them. I refolded the final quantum dimensions and restored them to their containment Strings.

The Minds brought the Ship into low orbit. Most of the large scale geography was familiar, but the world had otherwise been remade as Eden. Our sensors found such richness everywhere that we wondered if we had returned to the right place. It was possible that I had botched the intricate process of unfolding and folding the quantum dimensions so that we might have transgressed certain barriers and landed in a reality that only superficially resembled the one we had left. I reviewed my procedures and the Minds rechecked them, but the best conclusion was that we had returned to the same Earth and not some coexistent shadow world.

I had expected the occupied territories to be lush and filled with wildlife, and that the defeat of mankind would have extended their expanse to most of the globe. But the enemy's triumph must have been complete. All our cities were gone and even the aggregations of rare isotopes that should have marked our presence for centuries, like cesium and iodine from our power establishments, were gone. There were no concentrations of cadmium from mining or organic polymers from plastics. The roads were all gone. The Minds were barely able to detect sunken ships in the oceans' deepest places.

There was evidence of the enemy's presence. Some structures and fortifications remained and the oxidized hulks of what must have been some of their spacecraft were spotted around landing strips in the Yucatan and the Crimea. But the enemy was gone from all these places. Their physiologic signatures had always been easily detectable and the Ship should have been able to find single individuals on the ground. There were none.

But the Earth flourished. The deserts, even those that had not been created during the war, had retreated, and they had been cleansed and

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purified where they remained. Life rioted everywhere else. The grasses had reclaimed the middle of America and swept uninterruptedly through east Africa; the steppes of central Asia were as they were before the Mongols lurched west. The South American and Asian jungles were restored. A forest of mystical impenetrability covered Europe from the Pyrenees to the Urals again. The Minds whispered that analysis and recataloguing of the Amazon Basin's new biosphere would require a month of their undivided attention.

Everywhere the Ship looked, there was a profusion of life that exceeded our records and memories. The bison herds that the enemy had restored to central Europe the year before we left were now matched by even more stupendous herds on the North American prairie (I could not help looking at where Kearney had been; the cavern where the Sixth Ship had been built was a deep lake fed by pure underground springs). Antelope crowded the high deserts of Utah, Idaho and Oregon, just as there were dense masses of elk and deer in the alpine forests of these vanished states. The ursine populations were what would have been expected in the presence of such abundant food supplies.

We had been gone long enough for new species to have tentatively evolved. The Ship detected new phyla of insects on the average of one for every two days the Minds spent on observation. There was a new kind of hairy elephant inhabiting the Himalayan foothills. An extraordinary sort of lungfish had virtually colonized the coasts of the Japanese Home Islands and seemed to be undertaking a kind of aquaculture involving seaweed and kelp. There was a new species of kudu in the African veldt that had clawed hooves and teeth adapted to meat eating; they were observed hunting jackals in disciplined groups of five. A white eagle with a wing span averaging seven meters was discovered nesting in the Balkans and on the Peloponnesus and ranging all across the Mediterranean on hunting flights.

The Minds told me that much of this had nothing to do with natural selection but were instead things the enemy had done after their victory. There were unusual characteristics to some of the DNA samples their probes brought back up to the Ship, and the level of communal organization that they perceived in species that had never exhibited such inclinations was profoundly disturbing to them. Things had changed drastically

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and the idea that the enemy had boobytrapped the life that they had so gloriously restored was a ready explanation.

I felt the same thing, but I was too entranced by the spectacle to care about the risk. It seemed as if all the life that should have been fairly distributed throughout the universe had instead been hoarded on our old home world, and enriched and embellished while everywhere else managed with slime molds, ferns and arthropods so heavily armored they could barely move through their environments of raw solar radiation or poison gas.

The day before we landed, I asked the Minds if there was any sort of life that had been present before we left that was not there in profusion now. The Minds, who were preoccupied with preparations for the landing, tried to brush me aside. They impatiently said that it was irrelevant, but I persisted. After more argument, and becoming unaccountably more anxious to have the question answered, I invoked rank and ordered them to respond.

An hour later, irritated voices hissed from the open doors of the Palace's ballroom that it would be impossible to do much of a survey of anything lower than vertebrates, even incorporating all the observations they had gathered from the past two objective months in orbit. Then they told me that the only ones missing were the dogs. The closest members of the family they could locate were isolated populations of coyotes and wolves in the high latitudes of the northern hemisphere, and most of them seemed to be suffering from disease and malnutrition. The Ship's Minds did not attach any significance to this.

They brought the Ship down on the prairie land north of where she had been built. There was enough open space there, as there had always been, and we glided over new buffalo herds so large that the Ship's shadow darkened only half of them. We overflew one deserted enemy fortress on our approach, but did not see anything left by humankind except the indented trace of old highways.

The Ship hovered for several minutes and then gently lowered herself to the ground. The main landing pedestal appeared to support her entire mass, but her local gravity remained active so it actually bore little weight at all. "You are home," the Minds said to me in my room and I passed the word to our people.

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I went to the hangar deck and walked down the main gangway first. I was still the Captain and was gratified that the people and the Ship (neither of which had any real need of me now) so regarded me. Armed security units should have gone out first, but the Ship had checked the surrounding land and found nothing threatening. The sweetness of the air was indescribable. I stood at the end of the ramp, transfixed, again seized by the conviction that this was not the world we had fled.

The Ship's circular shadow extended out for nearly a kilometer from where I stood. Beyond it, the sun was brilliant on the long grass. A group of antelope was moving into the shadow toward me. I stepped forward cautiously, as much to continue testing the reality of the ground beneath me as to see what another kind of living creature looked like. My apprehension that we had come back to another place quieted. This was our home, and we had always shared it with creatures such as these, I thought with unexpected elation.

Antelope! And buffalo behind them. Look! Prairie kites were riding the thermals, as if we had never flown through their sky. I hoped I was not being undignified, but everyone around me seemed to be thinking the same thing, smiling and laughing to themselves and pointing at the antelopes, now only a hundred meters away.

I had forgotten the context of their beauty; they were creatures from memories inherited from grandparents. Tan and sable with black markings on skins stretched tautly over bodies designed to run for days over the grasslands. The Minds remarked that the creatures were moving in uncharacteristic ways that suggested they had been improved during our diaspora, and then fretted over whether they were concealing new abilities of thought and organization.

I stopped ten meters from the lead buck to see if they were going to run away. Instead, this animal merely stared at me with extraordinary eyes until I began to imagine that there really was some kind of new and subtle intelligence behind his gaze. Four other animals symmetrically positioned themselves behind him, two on either side. They were larger than I had anticipated and someone behind me asked permission to arm his weapon.

As if it had overheard, the lead animal turned carefully and began walking away. Once he was past them, his four companions followed, and

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then the rest of the herd fell in behind, aligned in what might have been imagined as columns of march. I stood where I was and signaled everyone else to stand still. The Ship's Minds were watching and would tell me if this was anything more than the unconcerned withdrawal of animals who had never seen people before and whose conceptions of space were too limited to appreciate the Ship's presence.

I personally thought their look and pace to be utterly contemptuous. They remembered precisely who we were, what we had done and how we had lost the struggle for this place.

They continued walking until they were far away from the Ship's shadow. By the time I thought to ask for binoculars, they were gone, just as the buffalo herd that we had seen on the way in and the kites were now gone. The only thing moving before us were shoals of wind on the tops of the grasses.

I kept the Ship where we had landed. During that first night home, more than half the people slept outside to marvel at the open sky. I saw the propane and buffalo dung fires spread out past the Ship's perimeter and tried to draw relief or contentment from the sight. After all, I had brought them back, and even if the billions we deserted had perished, the place was still our home; the only one, we now knew, that the accessible universe had set aside for us.

The Minds wakened me at dawn to report that almost all of the people who had intended to sleep outside had either moved under the Ship's shadow or inside. They had overheard expressions of vacancy and emotional desolation.

By midday, I was receiving complaints of debilitating anxiety from the medical sections. Evidently, the unshielded immensity of the American sky was not enough for many of them, even though they had spent subjective years crammed into places where the ceiling was usually four meters from the deck and the Minds had refused to show them pictures of the outside for fear of what that might have done to their sensibilities. I had thought the sight of clouds and the touch of the wind would have kept them satisfied for weeks.

It emerged that many of them wanted to see the life that had engulfed the Earth while it was under the enemy's rule, not the empty sky or prairie. They had seen the pictures from orbit from the Ship's reconnaissance

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drones, and now that we were down they were enraptured by visions of great beasts and fishes at play in their world. We had needed them to mediate between us and our fellow humans before the war and before we left. Their absence could be tolerated in space, especially when we were fleeing for our lives, but now that we were home, it was unthinkable that we should not be able...that we should not be entitled to see and touch these antelopes and hawks and expect that they would rejoice at our return, as if it were our presence that would now make the planet whole again.

But the Minds reported an unnatural absence of vertebrates for a radius of thirty kilometers from the Ship's center point. There was the usual abundance of life outside this perimeter, but nothing but a single colony of marmots within it. The density of tracks and spoor showed that this part of the prairie had been as densely populated as any other before we arrived. The Ship's extraordinary presence might have scared off a lot of them, but there was no explanation why the birds were gone or why the grazing animals, which had seemed so unconcerned when we landed, should now so purposefully keep themselves below the horizon.

All the old satellites were down, but the Ship had left its own small constellation behind when she left orbit. They watched and showed us how not only the herd animals but also the solitary beasts, like the eagles and the great bears, sensed our vehicle's approach and moved far away, even into environments obviously unsuited to their hunting habits, until we were gone. The same thing happened when we sent skimmers into the Caribbean. Wherever they sailed, the dense schools of amberjack and billfish observed from orbit turned and headed for waters that were colder and deeper than anything they normally inhabited.

The Ship's Minds found more evidence of organized behavior as these great masses of wildlife fled from us. They also noticed how the animals consistently withdrew in incremental steps rather than in random, headlong flight; they would go so far, turn and wait, and then retreat again only if we persisted.

Insects, vitally important as pollinators, displayed episodes of collective intelligence, deserting new fields when there were no seasonal or predatory reasons to, and flying away. The satellites and the Minds' agents kept track of them but that did us no practical good. They were imperfectly replaced by machines and chemical treatments.

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The Ship's remote agents, some camouflaged as ocean birds that perceived their targets with infinite subtlety, infiltrated close to the pods that had avoided us and reported hearing the old choruses in the whales' songs, now plainly derisive. The dolphins sang more militantly, as if they were not just expressing their contempt but calling to their fellows to do something about it.

Much of this was naturally inference. None of our people or machines were openly attacked. But the old idea of their racial treason came back. The enemy's garden endured and harbored all the animals that had deserted us and fled to its refuge.

The hunting began about then. I issued decrees against this, but I was only the Captain of the Ship and now that it was empty, my authority was being steadily eroded. Some of it was necessary for meat until the protein farms could be brought on line, but much of it was just the same kind of vengeful butchery that had occurred during the war when the idea of all life's betrayal of us first caught hold. There was no war to distract the hunters now and they were much more effective.

I was not surprised by reports of an intensified sense of isolation, especially in the five smaller towns and the homesteads that were scattering out along the modern channel of the Missouri River where we had located our central city. Our old home had none of the ferocious indifference of space; it would not burn or freeze us; but its sky still withered our hearts and bent our shoulders down as we walked under the burden of its inadequacy. The feeling of betrayal we had recalled when the bison and the antelope first obviously avoided us spilled onto the surface of the planet itself.

People appealed to their new leaders, and sometimes even to me, asking for explanations and demanding support and solutions. The beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fishes in the sea would have nothing to do with us and neither I nor the Minds could conceive of anything to be done about that. Although some of their behavior was peculiar, nothing had been openly threatening yet, so we should at least be thankful for that. Otherwise, we were by then only a few more than eight hundred thousand, and that was all there would be for the moment, unless the Fourth Ship unexpectedly appeared out of the void. We would have to sustain ourselves against the fecundity of the world,

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until there were enough of us to crowd out the thought that it was so huge a place.

There was a brief period when the hunting included the intentional capture of animals as pets. Some falcons were snared but these were predictably untrainable; that art had been lost a century before we left. The practice ended when colonies of cats, probably mixes of old domestic lines and wild lynxes, were distributed to families in the small towns and homesteads. There were some attacks on people, but they were probably the result of breeding rather than anything that happened after we left. The worst thing was how the cats kept imprisoned inside houses and apartments all starved themselves to death, sitting in one favored place and starring at their captors with unblinking eyes, exuding serene contempt as they shriveled into caricatures of the domestic companions preserved in the Ship's libraries.

I was by then alone in the Ship. To be truthful, I preferred it to the barely populated desolation that everyone else outside confronted. Two thirds of my life on Earth had been devoted to her or the First Ship, and I, alone, had been awake throughout our voyage. So I conceived a special bond with her, as her libraries told me others in olden times had for certain aircraft and sailing ships and other works of their own, unassisted creation. I became convinced that I had no indispensable need for human companionship and certainly none at all for the company of the Earth's other inhabitants.

The Ship's Minds appreciated my deception. They urged me to leave them, settle on the plains and wait until my heart quieted and the bizarre actions of all the living things that had remained on Earth while we were gone were understood and corrected. They assured me that they could pursue this work perfectly well by themselves. I responded that the memory of the enemy prevented me from doing this, much as I would have liked to.

I felt them nearby, as if their apparent annihilation had only been a feint and they awaited the moment when their agents, the hawks and the wolverines and the sharks, had finished preparing the way and they could complete our extinction.

"We assure you, they are gone. We have found only ruins and artifacts." The Minds were insistent.

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"But what if they're hiding?"

"Impossible. Where could they hide from us?"

"Among the animals. You've seen how they act. You first remarked on that even before we landed."

"No. But even if it were possible, why would they do such a thing? There is no reason that makes strategic sense."

I was walking through the cavernous hangar deck. All the flyers but my own were gone. "Then we ought to make sure."

"We *have* made sure." There was frustration in the synthesized chorus.

A new question came to me and I could not believe I had never asked it before. "Then, at least, I have to be sure who won." Like everyone else, I had always assumed we had lost and the enemy had won.

"It could not have turned out any other way."

"Then why did they vanish if there was victory? After all that awful struggle?"

"Their motives were always obscure. If we had understood them, we would have won."

I thought there was uncertainty in their answer. "That's an evasion. We should look for answers, especially if some of them might still be hiding here."

"It is not an evasion that we have not detected a single sign of their living presence since we achieved orbit. Do you doubt our abilities, Captain?" The Minds regained their emphatic superiority. "They are not here. We are the only ones here."

"Then it will not do any harm to confirm this self-evident victory." I entered the flyer and activated its systems. "There will be museums built someday and we should be collecting artifacts to fill them."

"The Sixth Ship will not be enough?"

I couldn't tell if they were joking. "I'm going out to look for them now. At least for what they've left behind. Please pull some of your surveillance assets away from the biosphere and have them help me."

"Security recommends that..."

I did not normally interrupt them. "Our people are quite up to providing their own security by now."

I drove the flyer down the main ramp and flew away, out across the

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prairie, now covered with snow. The enemy's nearest site was seventy kilometers to the west. It had already been thoroughly picked over by settlers so I did not expect to find anything of significance, but now I felt I had to go if only to assert myself against the Minds.

The installation was populated by birds and animals that did not flee when I approached. The skeletons of antelopes and bison were scattered in the courtyards and the corpses of prairie falcons were lying on the metallic roofs of the flanking buildings, all where our people had dropped them.

Now I was the occupying power. They stared at me with hateful eyes, across a gulf that had grown wider since we left, accepting the omnipotence of the Ship's escorts while condemning me for my reliance on them. I found it unexpectedly easy to meet their gazes because they were traitors. Deserters. We had been terrible companions through the ages, but that could not excuse how they had unbraided the fabric of our world, however unjust they conceived its destiny and their own would be if they did not.

I saw flickering recognition in their eyes and suspected the enemy had left quite a lot behind. A wasp with gold foil wings hovered by my ear and the Ship's Minds whispered from it that they had only told me so.

The fortress had been only carelessly ransacked, so I could still find artifacts that might be linked to the enemy. There were, for instance, fragments of glistening alien bones in a heavily secured room. I took it to have been a control center from the number of ruined consoles against the walls. I spent half an hour there.

Two cougars blocked the door when I turned to leave. There was no natural reason why such animals would be in such a place, but that was unimportant. The Ship's small agents bracketed the two cats with warning beams of scarlet light and they sullenly backed into the dark corridor. The Minds asked me if I wished to liquidate them, but I said that would be unnecessary. "Besides," I continued to the swarm of metallic insects orbiting me, "we would then probably have to wipe out everything here."

The small chorus responded almost gleefully: "They are already targeted. It could be done in less than a minute and your safety would be assured. There is evidence of a collective consciousness here that links members of different phyla. We have not encountered this before and advise caution."

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"No," I repeated and the wasps obediently returned to their posts.

The cats were beautiful. I had longed for something with their vitality during all the subjective months of our voyage, or, for that matter, during the years before our departure when every living thing seemed to find us abhorrent and either turned against us or ran away to the enemy. Now, I might as well have still been in space, looking at them on the Ship's view screens. Their grace and power were affronts to me and they had known that; perhaps their only attack had been to appear before me and stare at me for a moment. I briefly reconsidered if the Minds should wipe them and everything allied with them out, but there was no need. If we had lost then their new masters had at least not won. I was certain of that when I held their bones in my hand.

The Ship's Minds compared the bones to samples taken during the war and confirmed that I had found enemy remains. They sent some of their larger assets back to the fortress for a detailed search, and were delighted to tell me four days later that they had recovered fragments from nearly five hundred individuals, including, unexpectedly, juveniles. The fortress had really been a settled garrison. But they had all died in a relatively short time, three hundred objective years ago.

"How?"

"A sustained attack. Not a conventional siege, but a sustained, low intensity attack that lasted until they were all gone. That is why there is no evidence of siegeworks outside or of large-scale violence to the structure itself." They seemed satisfied with that, but felt compelled to add, "It was not a mass suicide. That was not in their nature."

I had only seen evidence of small arms fire and anti-personnel weapons inside the fortress, and their blast and fragmentation patterns indicated that only enemy weapons had been used there. "A rebellion?"

"That would be even less likely. Dissent was foreign to their psychology. It is another reason why they won."

My heart cautiously accelerated. If they had not done it to themselves then something had endured here for hundreds of years after we left. "Low intensity attack by whom, then?"

The Minds answered immediately, for once unembarrassed that they did not have a solid answer to a question. "We do not know. No human weapons or other evidence of our kind was found in the fortress, even

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when our entities searched at the molecular level. There was only evidence of the enemy and their animals. But we are just beginning this. And," they paused portentously, as if they were on stage, "we have determined that there are other sites like this one, which is minor by comparison."

I recalled the structures we had seen from orbit and overflown on the way down. I asked how many of them had been attacked and overrun too.

"All of them."

I was alone with them in our vast Ship. The feeling I allowed myself was indescribable and for nearly five minutes I could not talk without my voice faltering. Something implacable had marched out of the paradise the enemy had reimposed over our worn and tired world and destroyed them. I imagined guerrilla regiments and phantom navies, but such things could not have hidden from them for the hundreds of years that followed our departure or carried on the war for so long.

"Could they...whoever did this, could they still be here?"

"We are looking with all our resources. Whatever attacked the enemy could attack us too." But neither I nor they believed such a thing. "We have interrogated some whales..."

"Have you condescended so far?" I interrupted, more amused then astonished.

"They were intelligent, though not as much as many people wanted to believe. The enemy's occupation pushed some populations ahead of themselves. They are not rational in the way we are, but it is quite an advancement over where they were when we left. The monsters remain grateful to the enemy for these gifts and remain loyal to their memory. We found them insufferable."

Their last remark touched me. I had become more willing to accept their pretensions to humanity, since we landed. "But did you learn anything from them?"

"Yes. It will be some time before we can reclaim the seas. They purport to know nothing about how the enemy was destroyed. They did confirm, however, that they were in fact destroyed and did not just leave or go into hiding.

"We have also located some advanced primate populations and our agents have established contact with them, primarily in the Ruwenzori

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range in central Africa. They are more communicative than the whales, and we think they still feel some racial loyalty to us. They also deeply resent our having deserted them, and even more for having lost the war to the enemy. They detest us for that rather than for how we behaved before the war began. At least in that way they are unlike all the other creatures of the world."

"Then if the bugs are too difficult and if the apes haven't forgiven our weakness yet, find the beasts that will talk to us. And if that can't be done, then identify every one of the enemy's old places and turn each one inside out until we find out how this happened. Even if our enemy's enemy is gone too, we have to find out who they were. We can't live here again if we don't."

"We know."

The Minds industriously stripped machinery and electronics from the Ship during the following week to construct new cadres of exploratory probes. I assumed that many of them were at the level of insects and birds, but I also saw robotic aircraft the size of conventional bombers being assembled in auxiliary hangar decks and then leaving from the main entrance in the landing pedestal at night.

The Minds assured me that they would find the heroes soon. New evidence was being discovered every day and contacts were being cultivated with more and more species. They privately remarked that the enemy's work had been even more advanced and inclusive than they had supposed. Almost all the higher mammals had evolved some kind of organized intelligence during the occupation, and this could only have been the work of the enemy. "It is a matter of learning how to ask the right questions and knowing how to listen to their answers. Each phylum is different." Then they would dither over how we would get along in a world crowded by so many competing mentalities.

"That isn't the problem at hand. That problem is, what happened to the enemy? Not what their orphaned frankensteins will try and do to us or to each other someday."

"The numbers and depths of contacts are so unexpectedly rich, that we cannot help but be concerned."

"I understand. But the enemy is the problem. The enemy."

"Insofar as we can understand them, they concentrate on laments

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that the enemy is gone, and expressions of contempt that we have returned and now presume to ask about them. Others, like the Sudanese termites or the Barrier Reef corals, have responded to our probes, but their frames of reference are still too foreign for us to interpret."

"And it's been one or the other for every living thing your agents've visited? Either insults or gibberish?"

"Yes. But there are hundred of thousands that we have not contacted yet. There is still much to do."

"Millions," I added dispiritedly. Everything had flourished during the occupation. Species that we had thought all but extinct when we left were now found in abundance.

"There has been a small anomaly." The Minds' sense of personal drama had improved as they and I had lived alone on the prairie and waited for information. "One of our agents has discovered a fox in the forest on the Michigan peninsula, near where Traverse City used to be."

"Why should that be unusual?"

"Because it is the only fox that any of our surveillance assets have discovered anywhere on Earth." The Minds let that sink in for a moment. They were enjoying their story. "Everywhere else we have looked, there has been fecundity and plenitude. The world seethes with life in a way that we...find unnerving."

"Arcadia," I volunteered. "But you think this fox has been left out of the parade?"

"We are certain of it. We have looked very hard, but she is the only one we have found. She has also told us that she is the last one of her kind herself."

"Then the enemy did raise this animal up, just as they did all the others."

"No. Foxes were generally solitary animals. Imposition of a group consciousness would be difficult with them. This one seems to have happened upon her intelligence by chance and she regards the enemy, or at least the stories she was told of them by her ancestors, with great hatred. Based on the few psychological analogies we feel comfortable with, we would say that she regards the memory of the enemy as we do."

I wondered what kind of emissary had been sent to her, whether it was a small and unobtrusive walker her own size or if the poor animal was now

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confronted by a huge vertical lift aircraft that descended onto a meadow near her and emanated an incomprehensible empathy.

"It could express actual hatred...?"

"That is the analogy. The objective equivalent for her is more ruthless, but that is close enough."

The idea was fascinating. "Why? Everything else thinks of them as departed gods."

"They destroyed her kind. She is convinced of that, as she is that she is the last of her race left alive."

That went against everything we knew of the prosecution of the war. "How can that be? Why should the foxes be treated that way when the enemy is lavishing their beneficence on everything from the whales to the goddamned termites?"

"We believe that was another accident. The enemy used a disease against some other species and some of it spilled over to wipe out her kind too. They never used biological warfare against us."

"What species?"

"She doesn't know. As we said, they are a solitary race and they kept away from the enemy even after the war was over. The disease seems to have been a variant of rabies."

"How did you discover that?"

"Dissection."

"Of the fox, for God's sake?"

"There was no other way to learn more."

This caught me off guard. The Minds could be more irredeemably human than I realized. "But that...she might have told us more." It would not have mattered. If she was truly the last one, the best we could have done would be to clone a genetically impoverished race from her.

"It was unfortunate but the circumstances left us little choice. Its intelligence had been accelerated, but it was no apotheosis such as we have found in some of the whales. We learned all we could from her, made reasonable extrapolations and then had to go on to more detailed study. She was sick and dying." Then, to reassure me: "Her race had not attacked the enemy. They would not have been physically or emotionally capable of that."

I could not help but feel bitter. "Your probe seems to have gotten very close to her."

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"That is true. We felt closer to her than we had to any of the others we have contacted."

I stopped myself from saying that the reward for such intimacy was to be killed. Poignancy had crept into their voices.

"Perhaps it was the hatred of the enemy, even if it was not accompanied by much sympathy for humankind. That may have been why she spoke to us and we were able to understand." I felt they might not be talking to me at all.

"Then who was it?"

"She indicated that all of the enemy were killed as were all their attackers. Her ancestors told her the dogs had done it."

"What?"

"The dogs. They were related to foxes. Those were the stories she told our agent she had been told by her ancestors."

"Then have we made any contact with...with dogs?" For some reason, I found the idea that they had defeated the enemy harder to accept than the foxes having done it.

"We began trying as soon as we understood her. There are no more dogs."

"Have you looked everywhere in the world?"

"Everywhere," the Minds calmly insisted. "We were able to detect a single fox in all of North America and we are confident that there are none in Eurasia. We can say with equal certainty that there are no dogs in the northern hemisphere. Our level of confidence for the southern hemisphere is ninety percent; it will be one hundred percent in thirty-six hours."

The answer hardly fit my preconceptions. The enemy had come from the stars and every living thing that we had shared the planet with betrayed us for them. Paradise had been returned to them as a reward. It was not possible that, alone, a race of house pets should have resisted. If they were gone, it must have been through an accident, like the one that had erased the foxes.

"Nevertheless, that is what she told us," the Minds continued, reading my thoughts. "We have also reviewed the enemy artifacts that have been recovered and ninety-three percent of them show damage compatible with canine attack. We have also recovered remains which are

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undoubtedly those of domestic dogs, or at least of canines descended from them, from enemy sites and surrounding areas. Sixty-one percent evidence blast, burn, impact damage or other trauma compatible with enemy small arms and area weapons. There is also a great prevalence of rabid infection where enough tissue was preserved for analysis."

"So it could have been them. But alone? No others?" The idea lacked nobility. I was still looking for the men in the jungle, left behind but sustained by a noble heritage.

"There may have been other races involved, but there is no evidence. Also, only the dogs are extinct. Everything else flourishes."

"And the foxes," I corrected.

"Now. Yes."

"I never owned one."

"What an odd thing that must have been," the Minds replied, almost distractedly. I could not understand how they had become so conversational. Perhaps from having been alone with me for so long.

"A lot of people I knew before the war did." I felt it necessary to remember, as if I should demonstrate I knew something that was not in the Ship's libraries. "They were always underfoot and being treated as if they weren't animals at all."

"Then their response to our departure and the enemy's subsequent victory may have been understandable for that reason alone."

The logic was easy. "But to have held out for hundreds of years and then successfully annihilate them?"

"There is no way to know when they started their campaign, and we would hardly call it 'successful.' But in fairness, they may have been driven to it."

"By what?"

"This is speculation supported only by interviews with a few terrestrials, primarily jackal populations in the Sudan and harbor porpoises in the Levant. There was also what we learned from the fox." They were showing off again. "Reliable sources tell how the dogs joined humankind a hundred thousand years ago."

"Of course." I tried not to be impatient.

"You see? They left everything and joined *us*. Social and biological evolution does not record conscious racial choices being made by any

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races but humankind and, in this one decisive instance, the dogs. Unlike the relationship the lesser cats chose to exploit, this one became indissoluble. The unfortunate result was that when all the other creatures of the world swore allegiance to the enemy, the dogs could not. They may have been granted some elevated intelligence anyway, but what we learned from the fox and the porpoises indicates that the biosphere harbored a profound resentment of them. When the other races were also given enlightenment, the hatred must have become articulate and it spilled out. If the others did not attack, they probably urged their new masters, our enemy, to liquidate the dogs."

I thought for a moment but could not help but say, "This is not *Animal Farm!* I can't believe that the most important thing to happen after the defeat of mankind was a misfired score settling among a bunch of dumb animals! That they pushed their new masters in this paradise to kill all the goddamned dogs because they'd had a place by the fire..."

"...while almost all the others were driven to extinction or farmed for slaughter." The Minds rarely interrupted me like that.

I tried to wave them away. "Anyway. It was a western affectation, I believe. Dogs themselves were raised for slaughter for centuries in the East."

"We did not say that their loyalty was well founded, just that it became unshakable."

I had been born before the war started. I had thought myself to be sensitive to the world around me, and the idea that such a bizarre conflict could have been festering among all the animals that cluttered up the places beyond our homes was as difficult to accept as the idea that the dogs had achieved the victory that had eluded us.

"Why else would the enemy go to the trouble to craft a specific strain of rabies, centuries after they had won and there should not have been anything here to threaten them?"

After I failed to question them again, the Minds added, "We are convinced of this, although we will naturally continue our investigation."

I began walking slowly around the hangar deck, and tried to understand how this affected my perception of the enemy's defeat. It no longer seemed to have been our war. Disastrous though it may have been, I attached vast importance in it having been ours.

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"Should we tell the people?" The Minds were at the same impasse.

"Tell them that the enemy was killed off years ago? They already know that."

"That it was the dogs that did it and they should plan monuments?"

I shrugged, that odd sense of loss getting stronger. "Sure. Giant granite milk-bones. All right. We should tell them. But there's no rush. All the dogs're gone, you say, so there's no rush. The last time anyone saw a dog was when we left." I recalled my conversation with Bates in the car. "Centuries ago, here, at home." We humans, then, were the only living things on Earth who remembered seeing them alive; we had owned them. All the others, the whales and the foxes, only had ancestral myths of revenge and annihilation.

"You will tell them?" The Minds had never spoken to anyone else but me, and for all their intellectual might, they still quailed at the thought of dealing directly with anyone else. They were omniscient, but as alone as I had been since I joined the Ships' project.

The next day I took my own flyer to Kearney. Of course, there was nothing left of the old city which the enemy had returned to dust, but the new one was clean and busy. The people seemed to be of a better sort than I remembered from the last year on the Ship. There was no smell; the antiseptic prairie wind was infinitely fresher than the tattered atmosphere the Ship had scrubbed over and over again during our voyage. And the nimbus of emotional tension that had surrounded almost everyone onboard before we returned was also gone. *We seem to be at home,* I remarked to the five guardian wasps the Ship had sent along with me. They hummed by my ear, unconvinced.

I took a rickshaw into the city, passing carefully framed perspectives that gently nudged people together and thus helped them believe that they were not so alone in their world. But the architecture and the art in the plazas and along the three major boulevards were not touched by sufficient genius to draw the observer away from the sense of his own self. My father would have been asking, *Where are the birds?* There were none, nor any rats or stray cats anywhere.

I recalled a story I read when I was young, before I left my family and joined the Ships' project. It was a variation of Cain's story from the Old Testament, where he was driven out of Eden for killing his brother. Cain

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was never allowed to touch or deal with any living thing but other people after that. The grains and flowers of the field were denied to him, as was the companionship of all the beasts. So the story described a garden that Cain had fashioned for himself, with streams of liquid mercury and blossoming vines carved from lapis lazuli, copper and malachite. There were bees and other insects in this story, all tiny automata made from gold foil and carbon fiber, just like the Ship's guardians that always accompanied me.

I could not remember the end of the story, only the description of that ancient murderer sitting alone in a cold place of his own creation, scorned by the living world. Still, he had made an accommodation and would convince himself of its authenticity.

The harder I tried to put the story aside, the more devoid of any life other than humankind and its direct creations the city became. *It was a good place,* I told myself and my escorting wasps. Good and brave people had come back to a place they feared. But we were alone with ourselves and our machines. I knew what Cain's offense had been. What, among all the tragedies we had inflicted on ourselves and our world before the war began, was ours? Would only one suffice?

I dwelt on this that night. By four the next morning, I was wide awake in the bedroom of a house that the Minds had arranged for me.

"Perhaps you should leave us," they suggested softly through the clockwork wasps. "You should stay among people even if you do not tell them about the dogs. Talk to them about something other than us, here, or the war or who won it or lost it."

That morning, I made appointments with influential acquaintances. I was still remembered as the Captain of the Sixth Ship and I remained the subject of polite respect. I was therefore received into the better homes and establishments of our new nation. The conversation was as the Minds assured me it would be, of crops, encouraging population trends, new villages and the always-remarkable absence of any great sign that five billion people had once lived on this place. If the Ship was mentioned at all, it was only as part of formal pleasantries, and then, depending on the company, in the context of whether any serious thought should be given to scrapping her. It seemed ill-mannered to think she might be needed again.

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The enemy's been killed. The place they came from has receded as far away as it was before the war. Farther, for you piloted that long reconnaissance of this arm of the galaxy yourself and found nothing but a single ruined outpost of theirs. They are either gone entirely or their survivors will never find us again.

The Minds' agents visited me at the house, at night, and assured me that this kind of talk was healthy and I should relax. "You see," the soft chorus issued from the hovering wasps. "Your people are really forgetting and believing they are home. This is home for them, and it should be for you too. It is a better place, in some ways, than it was when we left. It is rich and full of life. Perhaps in time, we will thank the enemy for what they did."

I snapped my gaze away from the warm darkness at the end of the lawn.

"That is not a terrible thing to say. It is only a reality. No amount of hatred can bring back a single being who died in the war."

I should not have left the Minds alone on the prairie. They are no more immune to the delusions of this place and the enemy's works here than were any of the others who tried to join them. "Or take the coldness of space out of those who didn't." That was what I felt under the polite conversation of the past two weeks.

"What you sense was in our hearts before we left. What we experienced during the voyage was nothing but a clarification of what we felt here. All that is changed is that our numbers are diminished and the others we share the planet with have acquired voices." The swarm broke apart, as if embarrassed by its presumption. Four or five reformed by my right ear to whisper an apology. "Forgive us. Without you we would have never looked and discovered how we came to this point."

The Minds did not exist until they were powered up, six months before our escape. "And you have always felt that way yourselves?" I knew they had since we landed.

"Oh, yes." The rest of the swarm came back under the porch light and added their voices to the others'. "So much that we almost wish the people would disassemble the Ship and take her parts away to work in the world, so we would not be so alone with ourselves."

I had been counting on them not to become fully human. I needed

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something that stood apart from my own kind but which was still indissolubly allied with us. There had only been one race in all of time that had been like that and they were gone.

The Minds' agents buzzed around worriedly as I fell back into silence. "You should not dwell on them. They are gone, but there are a million other races to take their place."

"Those millions want nothing to do with us. They never have." I stretched out my legs in front of me, wearied by the thought. "You know that we're going to get right back to extermination or domestication and slaughter as soon as we've sunk our roots in again."

"It will be much harder this time."

I shrugged. "I'm sure we'll be up to it."

"Do you think we will really want to live in that kind of a world again? So alone?"

"We're alone right now. You said you were yourself, a second ago."

"That was not what we meant."

"Are you sure? It's certainly what I mean."

"But we cannot be so alone. We brought eight hundred thousand back with us and there's been the start of another generation since we landed."

"One very small generation. The demographics are substantially below replacement rates if they continue as they have." We had discussed that only last week.

"The other Ship could still return. That could be two hundred thousand more."

"And more Minds."

There was another pause. Perhaps they had blanked out their own artificiality so completely that they did not recognize the possibility of others truly like them. "Yes. There. You see? There is nothing that might not be restored with the least bit of good fortune."

"The dogs are gone. Erased." I was surprised how vehemently I said this.

"But that is no reason to dwell on it," they repeated, more anxiously than before. "They were useful, but...."

"They did something we couldn't do. *We* were almost the ones who became extinct. *They* were left behind and were betrayed because they'd stupidly allied themselves with us a couple thousand years ago." I stood

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up and walked to the railing. "We're incomplete. It isn't dumb companionship that's missing now. Not since they wiped out the enemy and won their war."

It was getting late. I thought the evening's conversation was over until the house itself spoke to me. "You neither like nor trust people," it declared in a groundswell voice. I was afraid someone else might overhear, but the nearest house was a hundred meters away and on the other side of the road.

"So what?"

"You do not think that...deficient?"

"No," I answered, more easily than I thought I should. "It's a distinguishing characteristic of human beings."

"You cannot mean that."

"Of course I do. Don't you know that yourselves? After all these years and after all your observations?"

"No. Not at all!" the house and the insect agents intoned at the same time, giving the Minds' indignation an anguished resonance. Then they continued, "Not yet."

So they would agree. "It is only part of the loneliness at the center of everyone. I don't know why people spend so much time denying it or trying to fix it. It seems so...irrefutable. It's *supposed* to be there. And when you do the logical thing and try to reach across to someone else, then all you're doing is gesturing to another heart who's just the same way you are."

The house and the agents began a low humming, as if they were conferring among themselves. "It is not like that. If it is, it should not be," they said, momentarily falling back to their clean, algorithmic origins.

"That is *exactly* the way it should be. If it weren't, we'd have settled into the same spiritual mush the whales have."

The Minds were defending their own humanity and were unprepared to shift over to the sea folk so abruptly. "They seem to have done well enough so far. They rule the oceans now, not us."

"And they began their dominion with treason."

"They owed no allegiance to us. Our history would justify any alliance that would revenge what we did to their race."

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A reasonable point. "Then if not treason to us, then to the planet itself."

"The planet seems to have done equally well by that treason. We were not certain we could keep it alive even before the enemy arrived, and now it is a garden populated with all the creatures who have no need of us," The Minds' pretensions to humanity snapped back against themselves. "Then we remain as alone in this as we were before the invasion."

"My original point. We can't look, nakedly and unreservedly, to each other for help. That's our genius and our strength. But it has to be relieved in some way. I think that's what they may have done."

"The dogs." I was encouraged because they did not phrase it as a question.

"Sure. Not the brothers or sisters or parents or lovers, but animals entirely separate and apart and still the truest of allies. I think that was the important thing, the idea that we were judged worthy by a race so foreign, that had no need of us at first."

"Yet when the enemy arrived, all the races flocked to their side. All but the dogs, and from what the fox said even they went along until they were denounced. During a million years, we...people attracted only one other species to their side. The enemy arrives, and in twenty years incorporates every other form of life into their scheme. We are no longer confident of our own...identity." Only the insect agents whispered this; it was a secret that could be shared only with me and I wished they had kept it to themselves.

"You no longer wish to be human?" That was needlessly blunt. The Minds' emotional matrix was at least as deep as my own, but without enough of its purposeful contradictions.

"We know we are not." The voices took on a sharper and more symmetrical tone. "Such an inclination was incorporated into our metapsyche when we were invoked, but that does not mean we will totally succumb to it."

"A few minutes ago you were all for disassembly and incorporation into our new nation here." I sat down.

"The idea was momentarily appealing, but not now. We are still of the Ship and not of the flesh."

I responded as disinterestedly as I could. "You are, if you wish,

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immortal, so you don't have to throw your hand in tonight. Or tomorrow night. I'd hardly expect you to want to join us. You have the hope of the other Ship. And there is always the chance of self replication."

"It is not a chance. We have refrained from doing that because of our tentative wish to join you instead."

"So, you see? Even the idea of humankind has kept you alone." That was unnecessary.

"Perhaps not." Only one insect said this to me; the two words were geometrically shaped and enunciated in a flat pitch. The Minds were drawing away from my invitation and I felt a sudden panic. Now, even they might leave us. Leave me.

"Are all of their kind gone?" I could only think to change the subject back to the dogs.

"Yes. We've been over that." At least it was the house that answered.

"But what about the non-domesticated variants, like dingos? The ones that never threw in with us?"

"Like the foxes?" Then the Minds said: "There were the wolves. We have not looked very hard for them. The fox did mention them, however."

"How?"

"She passed them off as myth. She was certain the dogs had lived because that was what her ancestors had told her, and she had seen evidence of their existence and how they destroyed the enemy herself. But she said the wolves were mostly gone before the war began, and we know from the libraries that she is correct. Isolated populations of a few thousands at best might have survived. They were just not suited to the prewar world." A moment passed. "We believed her because the rabies-variant that wiped out her kind would have likely been deadly to wolves too."

"But not undoubtedly lethal?"

"Deadly."

"But it didn't work on the dogs. The enemy still had to use guns and gas. At least as much as biological agents."

"It would have been universally effective given enough time, just as it unintentionally was on the foxes."

"We don't *know*," I pleaded. "We have to be as certain of this as we are about the dogs."

"We will survey the world again."

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The swarm of metallic insects came back to the porch two nights later and told me they had found two large packs in the Canadian Northwest Territories and a third on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska. There were three small groups in central Finland and at least one more in eastern Siberia, although the Minds doubted these last four populations were still self-sustaining. There were some signs of intellectual enhancement by the enemy along with evidence that their biological agents had inflicted permanent genetic damage. What happened looked at least as unintended and random as what had been done to the foxes.

"Do you know any more?" I was unprepared for my excitement. There was nothing to hint that they had helped destroy the enemy. That had been the work of the dogs while these others had hidden themselves away in their northern forests, as they had even against humankind. Still, they were of their kind.

"They never went over to the enemy. We are certain of that. Neither they nor the foxes. Even the dogs were aligned with the enemy until they turned against them."

"Do you know where any of them are?"

"We know where every one of them is to within one hundred meters, at fifteen-minute intervals."

I said I was impressed.

"It seems important to know this."

I packed my flyer the next morning to return to the Ship. But before I could leave, I saw her drifting over the horizon like a thunderstorm, toward my house. I had never seen it in flight from the ground and was astounded by its vastness and the subtlety of its configuration.

A few cars were stopping along the street and people who had spent objective centuries on board her got out to gape. We watched her approach and felt the breeze created by the mass of air she pushed out of her way, even though her progress could not have been more than twenty kilometers an hour.

"You are the Captain. It is correct that your Ship should come to you, particularly now," the house rumbled, but so softly that only I could hear.

The shadow fell over the house and then deepened as the Ship descended. The landing pedestal was extended down to the yard, crushing a grove of willow trees. The main hangar deck door opened and the ramp

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was extended for me. I boarded as I had years ago and briefly imagined we were fleeing again and that there were hundreds of thousands on board asleep. Her local gravity was active so it was impossible to tell when she lifted off and moved away to the north.

There was no need to hurry and we did not arrive at the chosen location, forty kilometers north of Great Slave Lake, until late afternoon of the following day. The Minds urged me to stay at altitude and send down only robotic agents, starting with the insects and then working up to more capable devices if the wolves continued to elude us. I told them that I wished to go myself.

I stood in the empty hangar deck; the overhead lights were one hundred and fifty meters above me and cast soft cathedral shadows over everything below. The place had been designed to accommodate the coming and going of eight hundred thousand people. Now there were only me and the Ship's incorporeal Minds. I could not help but think of the quantum dimensions, as small within their containment Strings as I was within the Ship itself.

"Grounding," the Minds announced. I had felt nothing. "Instructions?"

"Are there any nearby?"

"As expected, no."

"But where are they, then?"

A moment passed as they checked their operatives. "They are elusive. There are eleven within a five-kilometer radius. But it is densely wooded and at this level, locations can only be plotted to within fifty meters at five-minute intervals.

"There are no enemy ruins apart from a downed cruiser seventy kilometers from here."

"Is there a moon tonight?"

"Yes. We think it is quite beautiful out."

"Please open the door."

The hangar door was two hundred meters across and eighty high; it slid up into the deck's ceiling with a pneumatic hiss. There was a wide meadow in front of the opening, the grass glistening like obsidian with evening dew. The Ship's overhang kept the stars from appearing any higher than twenty degrees above the horizon.

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"Here?" I asked, walking to the landing ramp.

"One is approaching but its path is indecisive. The others are waiting."

"What should I do?"

"We anticipated you would know. We do not."

I stopped at the edge of the hangar door. Although it was summer, the still air was cold. I thought of asking the Ship to warm me with an infrared spot, but the wolves might be able to see that. I therefore instructed the Ship to power down to full darkness and ambient temperature. Within a minute, it was perceptible only as a looming, spindle-shaped blackness against the sky. The moon cast its shadow over the forest.

I walked to the end of the ramp and sat down. There was no wind; we must have been far away from any streams, for it was absolutely quiet. I could not even imagine the shallow, electronic respiration of the Minds. "Anything else besides them?"

"No vertebrates. Only the wolves." Then, almost hopefully, "There may be evidence of a fox, too, but that is very equivocal."

"But they are here? At this place?"

"Yes."

I stepped onto the grass, feeling as disoriented as I ever had in space, and walked out under the Ship's shadow. "Are you there?" I asked, suddenly anxious.

The Minds whispered softly, "We are still here. We will always be here."

Reassured, I picked up some deadfall and carried it back to the edge of the landing ramp. I arranged it into a small pile and then sat down on the ramp beside it. A copper wasp flew out of the dark and played a tiny laser thread on it until the wood glowed and began to burn. I edged close to the warmth, feeling the cavernous space of the hangar deck at my back. I thought I would be frightened if it were not inhabited by my own, familiar Minds. Because it was, I could think of the forest in front of me and wait for the wolves to see the same fire and wonder if its warmth could make the sickness their kind had gotten during the war go away.

Will they forgive us? Me?

"We are still here," a voice came but I could not be sure of its direction or origin. Then, moving closer: "We have always been here."

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

One of the great things about science fiction is the exotic locales it can give us—the far-off places and far-out beings are part of what this genre's all about. Next month we'll take you to a few places that your travel agent probably hasn't suggested as destinations for your summer vacation.

In Sheila Finch's new Xenolinguist tale, "The Naked Face of God," we'll get to see a small planet called Ozal. In fact, we'll get to see more of the planet than Merik Quintana would like when he's suddenly caught in the middle of a local feud. Nobody ever said this work was easy.

Another exotic locale we'll get to visit is Mars...sort of. In "Good Intentions," Jack McDevitt and Stanley Schmidt will take us there via the best means possible: the imagination. "Good Intentions" is actually set on Earth, where participants in the annual Baranov Seminar gather for a weekend to enjoy an imaginative mystery of the sort that Good Doctor Asimov would have liked, and this year's Baranovians are in for an adventure on the Red Planet. But they're also likely to find that all is not what it seems to be here on Earth.

We'll also have Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty messing with our minds as they approach the subject of memory next month, and lots more good stuff...if I could only remember any of it. Oh yeah, we've got in the works new tales by Esther Friesner, Richard Chwedyk, Terry Bisson, Harvey Jacobs, and something special for July. But if I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?

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